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Daily News correspondent
July 08, 2014 5:32PM

Print Page

Spine & Sports: Strategies to relieve back pain

It's estimated that more than 80 percent of us will experience a debilitating bout of back pain during our lives. Many of us will have recurring back pain. Here are some strategies for managing it and getting past it.

The research is pretty solid in support of active care for back pain. This means that lying around in bed is not the best way to go. In fact, more than two days of bed rest for debilitating back pain is likely to make things worse in the long run.

Research also shows that people with back pain should not succumb to fear and avoidance behaviors. For example, some people stop exercising or socializing for fear that those activities will make their condition worse. Actually, the opposite is true. Doing exercises of any kind that are tolerable, as well as keeping a positive mental attitude, can help resolve the pain. This all means that you must be your own advocate and not rely on doctors or pills to solve all the problems.

Understand that while pain is inevitable, misery is optional. Self-care or home-care strategies include watching your posture and being careful how you bend and move. We teach our patients to use a "golfer's lift" to pick things up off the floor, and not to bend at the waist. Think about how golfers pick up a golf ball: they hold their club against the ground and swing one leg in the air while pivoting on the opposite hip. This keeps the spine straight.

Exercises should be tailored to the individual. For some, any exercise movement that reduces the back pain is encouraged, and those that provoke the pain should not be done. Sit-ups or abdominal crunches are detrimental and should be avoided, since they flex the spine, causing overload to the lumbar spine discs. (When golfers pick up golf balls, they are not flexing their spines.) Favorable are "spine-neutral" exercises like prone planks or side planks. Beginners can try a bent-knee side plank.

Also, exercises that engage the back muscles safely are helpful, including the all-four's-opposite-arm-and-leg, or "bird-dog," exercise. These all can be seen on my exercise page at www.drgillman.com.

Ergonomics is factor, and those who spend a lot of time sitting at a desk or in a vehicle must find ways to routinely get up and move. Alternating to a standing workstation or taking frequent breaks to climb stairs or walk around all help prevent back problems.

Also, watch your diet. Yes, it is true. Your diet might actually play a role in how your back feels. Diets high in processed sugar and processed grains tend to cause a mild systemic inflammation. Swapping out grain products for quality meat, dairy and vegetable products can make your whole self feel better (and help you lose some weight, too).

For treatment, research supports spinal joint manipulation by a highly trained provider as one of the best and safest treatment avenues. Doctors of chiropractic have the most training and skills in this area.

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