

SPINE & SPORTS: Hit the gym!

Tuesday

Posted Jan 17, 2017 at 2:38 PM

Updated Jan 17, 2017 at 2:38 PM

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Our technological world demands more sitting, but our bodies were not designed to be sitting all day. Inactivity is bad for the body and mind, and the effect of exercise on our total physiology is altogether good. This is especially true when it comes to back pain, as increasing body movement and heart rate can be very alleviating.

Whether new to exercise or an avid gym rat, it takes some motivation to abandon the comfort of a soft chair or cozy living room in favor of straining muscles, sweating and sucking wind. But as everyone who does it knows, we always feel better when a workout is done, and for back pain patients the right kind of workout can also reduce dollars spent going to the doctor.

One paradigm for treating lower back pain involves assessing body or joint stiffness, weakness or joint instability. Modern day chiropractors spend much of their time ungluing stiff joints (and not realigning bones, contrary to the outdated and invalid concept of locating misalignment and creating realignment of bones). Weakness, on the other hand, is changed only by strength training. Instability, where joints become loose and lose their ability to stay in alignment during body movements, is another factor. For example, a spinal vertebra bone that is loose and slides around on an adjacent vertebral bone during bending movements is considered unstable, and can be the cause of back pain. Very unstable joints require surgical fusion. But for mildly unstable joints, stability exercise training is the only defense.

For the self motivated and knowledgeable, home exercises are fine, but for most everyone else with back pain, the gym is the best place to go. Gyms usually have a full gamut of equipment to meet multiple needs. Going regularly and seeing the same faces consistently leads to conversations, camaraderie and a social network. This creates what is known as peer group motivation, a critical factor that can make the difference between sticking to a program or not. Also, some people need instruction and guidance to do the right exercises in the right way, and there are personal trainers at the gym ready to fit that bill. The key here is to find certified personal trainers who have the education and skills to strengthen their clients bodies without causing worse problems.

For athletes, weekend warriors, sedentary office workers or anyone coping with back pain, utilizing all of the gym's offerings can keep one motivated and more fit. It's also a great way to shed stress, have some fun and make social connections. Whether your New Year's goals include achieving better fitness or thwarting back pain, hitting the gym is one of the best ways to ensure success!

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