

A
PAIN

IN THE



BACK

AND HOW TO GET RID OF IT

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Your Back – A Simple Structure with Complex Workings

The back is more complicated than you think. We take it for granted. We lay down on it, bend it, and use it for leverage. Then when it stops working, we find out real quick how much trouble we are in without a healthy back. Maybe it has something to do with what the back is supposed to do, and more importantly, what the back is not supposed to do.

Structure of the back

Let's start with the basics. If you remove the skin, the muscle, the fat, and the ligaments, you can see just where we begin with the back. We'll omit the technical terms and use layman's terms that we all can understand to begin discovering what forms the back.

Your back is made up of *vertebrae*, small rounded bones that stack on top of one another. These bones, also referred to as the spinal column collectively, have openings in the middle. That opening is to accommodate your *spinal cord*. The spinal cord is the long tube that runs from the base of your brain all the way to your tail-bone. All of your nerves arise from the spinal cord and branch out to various places within the body.

There are 5 sections to your spinal column:

- Cervical – 7 movable vertebrae in the neck area
- Thoracic – 12 movable vertebrae in the chest area
- Lumbar – 5 movable vertebrae in the lower back area
- Sacral – 5 fused vertebrae at the level of your pelvis which connect with your pelvis
- Coccyx – 4 fused vertebrae that make up your tail-bone

Your spine has a natural curve to it that allows you to move fluidly instead of stiffly. Another reason we have ease of movement is the spongy discs that reside in between each vertebra. These discs have a soft middle that protects the spinal cord and a tougher outer layer that supports the weight of the vertebra above and below it.

There are spaces between the vertebrae, created by their unique shape, that allow nerves to pass through. These nerves travel to organs, muscle, ligaments, tendons, skin and the like. At lightning speed, impulses are passed from organs to nerves to the brain, and back to nerves and back to the organ. That is why there is no delay from the time you put your finger on a hot stove to the time that you scream and pull your hand away.

That's the structure of the back, simply illustrated. However, when you're experiencing back pain, you wouldn't think so. There is a complexity to the machinations of the back that cause many of us to suffer from aches and pains that seem like a mystery. When you understand that the back is your support system for your entire body, you can better understand the importance of good back care.

* * *

What Is Causing Your Back Pain?

Just about everyone can agree; when your back hurts, your world seems to come to a screeching halt. It affects everything that you do from that point on. You can put a broken arm in a sling. You can't put your back in a sling and continue with your day.

Back Strain = Back Pain

Let's begin with the simplest form of back pain. That would be back strain. This occurs when you strain the muscles that support the spine in the back.

What does it feel like? Think of a "charley horse" in your leg. The muscle knots up because it was stretched the wrong way or over extended. The pain is immediate and continues until you can work out the kinks.

With back strain, you have essentially done the same thing. That muscle is out of sorts and needs to relax and heal. Let's consider what could be the cause of your back strain:

- Sudden jerky movements
- Improper lifting posture
- Poor sitting posture (slouching or hunching over)
- Injury
- Obesity
- Stress
- Shoes that are wearing unevenly
- Dehydration (your back needs water too)

When the muscles of the back are constantly strained, strengthening them may be the key to helping with back strain and inevitable pain.

Herniated Disc = Back Injury

However, back pain can also be the result of a structural problem. This occurs when an injury to the back involves the vertebrae, nerves, and discs. This injury may be a trauma to the back, known as "an acute" injury, or an injury over time, known as "a chronic" injury. One of the most common injuries involves the discs.

The discs are located between the vertebrae of the back. They serve to cushion the nerves and the bones. When a disc is herniated, the inner

spongy matter squeezes out through the outer layer. This puts pressure on the root of the nerve that arises from that spot on the spinal cord. Usually, herniated discs are found in the lumbar region of the spinal column which corresponds to the lower back.

Herniated discs can be the result of an acute injury, a chronic injury such as a repeated motion that wears down the disc over time, or as a result of what is known as *degenerative disc disease*.

The worn disc spills its spongy material out and the disc "herniates." The material can begin to rub against nerves causing further pain.

Typically with this type of injury, what you will notice is pain in the hips and down the legs, commonly known as *sciatica*. Those nerves are pinched and can cause a loss of feeling in the legs from time to time. Your leg could have the sensation of "giving out" which is disconcerting as you are actually unable to move your leg for a time.

Anytime you experience unexplained pain in your back or down your legs, especially repeatedly or over a period of time, you should consult a health professional. The only way to know if your back pain is more than the occasional pain from overuse is to have the proper tests. Taking a few pain killers to alleviate minor back pain that occurs once in a while may be alright; say, when you rake the yard. But, serious back pain requires serious attention from a doctor. Take care of your back and it will take care of you!

* * *

Diagnosing Back Pain – Why We Need a Professional

All you know right now is that your back hurts. When you sit, stand, roll over or try to stretch, it just hurts. You may think you can ignore the pain in hopes it will go away. This is fine if back pain is a rare occurrence in your life, brought on only after attending to a back-breaking chore. But, once back pain becomes a routine part of your day, you need a medical professional to get a proper diagnosis and treatment.

You know, a little knowledge can be dangerous. Many of us are “armchair physicians” when it comes to healing our own wounds. When your back first begins to hurt, you may put heat on to relax the muscles or ice packs on to reduce the inflammation and dull the pain. This is not necessarily a bad thing UNTIL you realize that your back pain hasn't lessened. Worse yet, you misdiagnosed the cause of your back pain and you're icing a knotted muscle and heating an inflamed joint.

What will your doctor do to diagnose your back pain?

One of the main reasons to consult a physician about your back pain is because it can be caused by things other than the run-of-the-mill suspects like injury, strain, exercise, or excess weight. As an example, your kidneys lie against your back outside of the abdominal cavity. Kidney stones and kidney infections can cause pain in the back. Assuming your lingering back pain can be stretched out or cured with ice packs could be dangerous.

Rather than make assumptions, your doctor will begin by asking you a series of questions meant to zero in on a few clues about the origin of your back pain:

- How long have you had your pain?
- What does it feel like? Is it sharp or dull?
- When does the pain occur? Sitting? Standing? Lying down?
- How have you managed the pain so far?

Now, the detective work begins. Your doctor will perform various tests, based on your answers, to diagnose the cause of your back pain. This series of tests is the best way to come up with a helpful treatment.

Visual – The doctor will have you stand and look at your back. He can evaluate your posture, feel for any bulges in the back or areas that are sensitive to pain. This can be done during your initial visit.

X-rays – This is the only way to see your bones. The doctor can check the bones of the vertebrae and the surrounding supporting tissue. If there are

any misalignments or fractures, you will have a better idea of what you will be dealing with in the way of treatments.

MRI – This is the magnetic tube which allows the doctor and technicians to see the soft tissue. If there is a herniated disc or a degenerative disc problem, the doctor will know.

Myelograms – This involves the nerves. When a disc is herniated, nerves can become pinched. By injecting dye into the spinal cord, doctors can see if and where nerve damage is occurring.

Self-diagnosing back pain is a risky business. A backache now and again when you've been out mowing the lawn or painting the house is understandable. However, intense or long-term back pain is nothing to play around with. It could be a sign that something is wrong with either the structure of your back or your general health. A visit with your doctor will either reassure you that rest and exercise will help your back or you'll find proper treatment to resolve a health issue. Seeing your doctor is the only way to put your mind at ease and get on with your day – without that old pain in the back!

* * *

Massage Therapy for Your Back

Pampering yourself at a spa is considered more and more these days a necessity. For those who have issues with back pain, a good massage may be just what the doctor ordered. Massage is an alternative therapy that can bring relief for many who suffer from a pain in the back.

There are different types of massage therapy but the basic tenet is the same. Through massage, pressure is applied to the body in various ways (knuckles, palms, chops, fingers) and through different media (oils, stones, cups, balls). The goal is manipulation of the soft tissues of the back to promote better health and pain relief.

The ancient practice of massage therapy goes back thousands of years. In India and the Orient, the idea is to release the energy that is trapped in parts of the body through some sort of injury or stress so the body is free to heal itself. This energy is referred to as "Chi".

Benefits of Massage Therapy

When you are suffering with chronic pain, massage therapy can be an alternative to surgery. Doctors usually consider surgery a last resort, but many fortunate people avoid surgery all together with the use of massage therapy. Here are some of the benefits of massage therapy:

- Reduce stress
- Increase flexibility
- Reduce blood pressure
- Alleviate many types of back pain
- Increase range of motion
- Reduce cramps and spasms
- Improved blood circulation in muscles
- Choosing your Massage Therapy Type

There are many different types of massage therapy. Choosing the right one will take a bit of experimenting, but any reputable massage professional will walk you through the proper method for your particular back pain.

Swedish massage – Involves long strokes with the hands. Ideal for increasing blood flow to the muscles, increasing circulation, reducing toxins in the muscles and increasing flexibility.

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