

Western Pennsylvania Guide to Good Health

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Do You Have Lower Back Pain?

by Jay Karpen, M.D.

Not a day goes by that a patient doesn't come into my office with lower back pain--and most days, I see several patients with similar problems. That's not surprising when you consider what a common problem it is. Between the ages of 30 and 40, ten percent of all adults will experience significant back pain for the first time. Twenty-five percent of them will experience recurring back problems. And, 75 percent of all adults in the U.S. will experience significant back pain at some time in their lives. As many as five percent of them will need to be hospitalized and a small percentage will require surgery.

As you probably are aware, you can do things in your daily life that will help you avoid back problems; bending your knees and keeping your back straight when lifting heavy objects and stretching thoroughly before exercise are two such precautions. However, some situations that can cause back pain--for example, auto and work accidents and other unexpected events--can hardly be anticipated.

Lower back injuries come in many types and varieties, but nearly all fall into two diagnostic categories: (1) those that are caused when nerves within or exiting the spinal column are irritated, and (2) those that result from damage to the soft tissues that connect one or two segments of the lower back to another.

Also, there are two kinds of pain: acute pain, which appears suddenly, stays for a while and has a predictable cure, and chronic pain, which lasts longer or is recurring, and may produce complications.

Because patients visit physicians after the onset of lower back pain, it's important that we identify the cause of the problem and determine what treatment will most effectively repair it, rather than simply prescribing pain medications that treat only symptoms. Our job is to:

- Listen to the patients' complaints
- Thoroughly evaluate the physical situation (since the musculoskeletal structures of the back rarely act alone in producing pain) and medical history
- Thoroughly examine the patient
- Prescribe any and all tests necessary (such as X-rays) and
- Determine the most appropriate course of treatment that will provide relief and correct the situation in the long term.

Some of the most common lower back problems include postural back pain caused by sprains and strains resulting from injury; acute disc problems marked by pains that often shoot into the lower extremities; and pain resulting from previous surgical procedures, such as lumbar surgery, that may cause pain not only in the lower back, but in the hips, buttocks or upper rear thighs.

Depending on what the physician determines regarding the cause of the pain, one or more treatments might be ordered, including medications such as anti-inflammatory drugs; nerve blocks; muscle stimulation; physical therapy and rehabilitation; and surgical intervention as a last resort. Also, it may be necessary to address and treat psychological and/or emotional issues resulting from pain.

As you can see, lower back problems have many causes. If you haven't experienced them (and hopefully you won't), my advice to you is to be careful when you do anything that might be strenuous, and keep your muscles stretched and flexible through regular exercise.

Stay healthy!

John Fries

2637 Brighton Road

Pittsburgh, PA 15212

Phone: 412-760-2299

E-Mail: johnfries@comcast.net

Web: www.johnfries.com