

Living Fit: Even When It's A Pain In The Back

Back pain haunts people in epidemic proportions: Thirty-one million Americans have lower back pain at any given time. One half of all working Americans admit to having back symptoms each year. One third of all Americans over age 18 had a back problem in the past five years severe enough for them to seek professional help.

Some experts estimate that as many as 80 percent of all of us will experience a back problem at some time in our lives.

And, the cost of this care is estimated to be a staggering \$50 Billion yearly and that's just for the more easily identified costs!

Certainly accidents are a cause of some back-related problems. But there are many other causes ranging from anatomical abnormalities to osteoporosis. Some are unavoidable, some are not, some are acute, some are chronic, some are mechanical, and some are systemic.

America has become a country of ease, at least on a physical level. Our cars get us everywhere, even destinations that use to be just a short walk away. Everyday modern appliances (that we just can't live without) such as dishwashers, garage door openers, washers and dryers, riding lawn mowers and remote controls (the male tool of choice) are all wonderful conveniences, but they do tend to keep us sedentary and weak. On the other hand, many of us work long hours at stressful jobs behind desks or at the wheel of a car. And this stress often settles in our backs and necks when propped in unhealthy positions for prolonged periods of time. These long, stressful, uncomfortable hours are typically not balanced with any preventative exercise. This stress combined with the lack of effective exercise often leads to weight gain, which leads to more intense back pain a vicious cycle indeed.

As a rule, there is no need to see your doctor immediately if you are suffering acute (sudden, short term) back pain. The main exceptions to this advice are any disturbance of bladder or bowel function,

or if there is severe sciatica (chronic nerve pain in the hip and leg area), especially when associated with weakness of the leg. If the back pain is severe and does not respond to bed rest or simple pain killers, that would also be a reason to call your doctor.

Now for the good news. There is a way not only to prevent back pain, but in many cases, to actually reverse it. This is a research-proven truth: maintaining strong, lean muscles not only benefits your general health throughout your life, but especially your back, which is at the very core of your body. If your back hurts, it can literally shut you down for all life activities. As we get older our bodies will lose muscle mass if we remain inactive. The average person (male or female) loses an average of 1/2 pound of muscle per year after the age of 20. This doesn't sound like much, but at age 40, 10 pounds of muscle have been lost. Since muscle burns calories, this loss of muscle results in weight gain as we age. This is the reason most people are overweight.

Controlling one's weight could be reason enough for one to keep their muscles strong. But in my experience this should be at the bottom of a long list of other health benefits associated with a commitment to an effective strength training program. Keeping a strong muscle core will aid in a long, pain-free life. It can also save one from the pain (and medical expense) that can be associated with accidents and injuries. To that I can personally attest. Having suffered through more than my share of automobile accidents, I'm still walking and talking, much to the amazement of my orthopedic physician. He attributes my resilience to the fact that my body was fit and strong from years of consistent strength training.

There are two aspects to exercise in relation to lower back pain: first, exercise in general, and second, exercises for specific types of back pain. The effects of exercise for isolated lumbar extensor muscles (lower back muscles) were examined in 54

chronic low-back pain patients. In studies conducted at several state universities, subjects were randomly assigned to either a 10-week exercise program or a wait-list control group that did not exercise. The results indicated a significant increase in isometric lumbar extension strength for the treatment group and a significant reduction in reported pain, as compared with the control group.

In 1988, Arthur Jones founded MedX Sports Medical Industries which focused heavily on the development of core strengthening equipment. By 1993 the company had spent \$83 million just on developing equipment to effectively work the muscles of the lower back. The result was the MedX Lumbar Isolator. Jones work also produced several other pieces of equipment that focused on strengthening the other core muscles the abdominals and upper leg muscles all of which contribute to a healthy, strong back. In our 20 Minutes To Fitness studio, this is the only type of equipment we use with our clients for core muscle strengthening.

The number one reason people give for not staying strong is a lack of time. But to paraphrase an old TV commercial you can either take the time now or pay the price later. The time and money you Invest now will be much cheaper and shorter than the time and money that you will spend later in dealing with a bad back. There is no time like the present to give yourself the gift of strength, so put down your remote, get off your heating pad and get back in the game.

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