

## “RELIEVING BACK PAIN”

An estimated eight out of ten people in the United States will injure their back at some point during their lives. Few of these problems will require extended treatment, but persistent back problems and back pain can still be very uncomfortable and stressful for many of us.

Managing and relieving back pain is not simple. The experience of back pain is subjective, so it's often difficult to easily measure the level of treatment necessary. In fact, many health providers who treat back pain find it challenging to obtain measurable signs to diagnose a patient's symptoms. Additionally, everyone's experience of back pain is different.

Back pain descriptions range from the slight — such as dull, sharp, and throbbing, to the extreme, such as pulsating, stabbing, and shock-like — just to name a few. People experience and describe back pain so differently, partly due to its varied and complex origins. In fact, pain originates from numerous places in the body, such as muscles, bones, nerves, organs, or blood vessels. For these reasons, it is often difficult to target the exact origin of someone's back pain.

Back pain can also be described as acute or chronic. The word “acute” derives from the Latin word for needles and is usually described as a severe, sharp sensation. The initial stage of an injury is called the acute phase. On the other hand, the word “chronic” originated from the Greek word for time. Chronic back pain is pain that persists after a length of time, often months to years. Many back injuries tend to become chronic, especially when not treated properly during the acute phase. Chronic back pain is often experienced as a dull ache or constant nagging irritant.

Acute and chronic back pain sensations also travel through different nervous system pathways inside the body. When you injure muscles or ligaments in your back, nerve endings called pain receptors pick up the pain impulses and transmit them to the spinal cord. From here, the pain message ascends to the brain. This process takes place at varying rates of speed depending on the size of the nerve fiber involved. Acute back pain tends to travel on faster, larger diameter fibers, while chronic back pain prefers smaller, slower pain fibers. Experts suggest that chronic back pain affects the brain's limbic system, which is associated with emotional states. Anyone who has ever had a long-term painful back injury or regular back pain knows that negative or distressing emotions may accompany or perpetuate the initial injury.

The best way to treat chronic back pain is to prevent it. Although proficient early treatment does not always prevent an acute back pain injury from becoming a chronic problem, it is a good insurance policy. Early treatment is especially important with back pain injuries to the soft tissues (muscles, tendons, and ligaments) to prevent them from becoming weaker, less elastic, and more pain-sensitive. A hands-on approach that works to repair the injured tissues is one of the best

ways to treat both acute and chronic soft tissue injuries. Some examples are joint and soft tissue manipulation and mobilization, typically performed by a chiropractor or osteopath.

A good chiropractor can make a big difference for most individuals experiencing either chronic or acute back pain. A chiropractor may suggest stretching exercises and make regular adjustments to a patient's back to relieve back pain. Other good options for back pain are massage and physical therapy. A formal rehabilitation program at a health club or therapy clinic may also help strengthen weakened and damaged muscles, especially the back's core stabilizers, which often cause chronic back pain. The healing power of the hands-on approach is a positive experience that many people enjoy through therapeutic massage or body work.

The effects of a good massage go much deeper than the skin's surface. Massage and chiropractic therapy can:

- 1) Help improve blood circulation and lower blood pressure while alleviating back pain.
- 2) Act as a detoxification system by propelling toxic waste products through the lymphatic system.
- 3) Help improve muscle tone and prevent muscular atrophy from inactivity or illness.
- 4) Reduce emotional stress and promote a sense of well-being.

How can something as simple as this hands-on therapy have so many positive benefits? A tense or painful muscle is often chronically contracted. In an acute situation such as a recent injury, the muscle can be in actual spasm. This contraction or spasm decreases blood flow to the muscle, which decreases the nutrient and oxygen supply to the cells of the muscle and related nerves. A chronically contracted muscle will build up lactic acid, a sign of fatigue. This oxygen shortage and lactic acid buildup irritates the nerve cells, which perpetuates the contracted muscles - often resulting in discomfort and back pain. Massage and chiropractic therapy can help remove the lactic acid and other metabolic waste products from the cells and reverse this process, interrupting the vicious cycle of pain-spasm-pain. This can do wonders for most sufferers of back pain and has a lasting impact on many patients.

There are a multitude of massage styles that are beneficial to helping back pain. These options depend upon the individual's needs and preferences. They include:

Swedish Massage is the basic "relaxation" style of bodywork, using long strokes, squeezing, and kneading. The Swedish practitioner helps to improve circulation and back pain by loosening or relaxing the superficial layers of muscle. This type of massage is particularly useful for muscles and back pain resulting from stress or a tough workout, as it is often more gentle than other styles.

Sports Massage: this form of massage therapy works on a deeper level of musculature or connective tissue. This style fits more with the "no pain, no gain" philosophy. The therapist uses

slow, hard strokes and deep, sustained finger pressure to work deeply into the contracted muscles, fascia, and tendons to help alleviate back pain. This technique increases flexibility, encourages muscles to work at their fullest capacity, and speeds up healing by reducing swelling following an injury. It is especially indicated for athletes and “weekend warriors” who suffer from tight or sore muscles and can be another successful solution for back pain.

Shiatsu and Acupressure: This form of bodywork tends to be invigorating rather than relaxing. Fingers, thumbs, fists, and elbows are used to apply pressure to points along acupuncture meridians, which are believed to be the body's energy pathways and can help alleviate a patient's back pain. This type of therapy focuses on relieving blocks in the pathways and re-balancing the flow of energy.

Reflexology and Zone Therapy: reflexology assumes that parts of the feet (as well as parts of the ears and hands) correspond to other parts of the body's anatomy. In other words, stress or illness in a certain part of the body may appear as a painful or sensitive area on a specific foot area. Reflexologists apply pressure to the side, top, or bottom of the feet to help reduce dysfunction in other parts of the body, which can be helpful for those suffering from chronic back pain.

Not all techniques work for everyone, so make sure to inquire about the philosophy and style of the massage therapist you call. If your massage isn't as satisfying as you had hoped or your back pain doesn't go away, don't give up; try another therapist!

Massage therapy schools are a cost-effective way to test different massage styles; senior students generally work for lower fees while completing their internship. There are a few conditions in which massage would not be a good option for treating back pain, such as inflammation, fever, significant swelling, or severe back pain. But for the common aches and pains that most of us experience, as well as for the general stresses of life, massage is an outstanding way to treat ourselves to a positive, revitalizing experience.