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CHRONIC LOW BACK OR NECK PAIN

THE HIGHLIGHTS

Multiple Pain Generators: Pain typically is coming from a combination of a variety of sources. For patients with chronic (long-term) low back/neck pain often a single source of the pain cannot be identified.

Wear And Tear Does NOT Equal Pain: It is very common as we age to have degenerative (wear and tear) changes on X-rays and/or MRI. These can include degenerative disc disease, “bone on bone”, bone spurs, herniated/bulging/disintegrating discs, and stenosis.

These findings are common (the “grey hair” of the spine) and ARE NOT ALWAYS ASSOCIATED WITH PAIN.

Best Treatments: Physical therapy, activity modification, lifestyle changes, **STAY ACTIVE**, and occasional medications during severe episodes.

Goals: Minimize pain ((when pain has been present for long periods of time, zero pain can be difficult to achieve), improve function, implement strategies for long term success.

Lifestyle Changes: Smoking cessation, healthy diet, good sleep, exercise, good posture, stress reduction.

No Surgery: In general, surgery to treat chronic neck or low back pain is typically not an effective or recommended treatment.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHY DOES MY BACK/NECK HURT?

In up to 90% of people with neck or lower back pain, one specific structural reason for the pain can't be identified, even with advanced imaging such as MRIs or X-rays. Your spine is a complex system of bone, discs, joints, muscles, tendons, ligaments, nerves, and blood vessels. Any of these structures can be involved when your back is hurting. Your brain and the way it views your lower back is involved as well. A specific injury to a structure doesn't have to happen for your back to hurt. Low back pain can develop slowly over time due to gradual changes that occur naturally during daily life, such as loss of flexibility, loss of muscle strength, or generalized fatigue of the lower back as a whole. Over time, this leads to over active sensitivity: an increased sensitivity of structures in your lower back and the sensitivity and protectiveness of your brain in regard to your lower back. This increased sensitivity can lead to your pain.

WHAT ARE THE GOALS FOR OUR TREATING CHRONIC LOW BACK OR NECK PAIN?

Minimize your pain: Often times for people with long term back/neck pain – complete pain resolution is not a realistic goal.

Get you going stronger: the goal is to improve and optimize your activity and function.

Education: give you knowledge about what's going on in your body and tools for the future and long-term success.

IS THERE A CURE? HOW LONG IS THIS GOING TO TAKE?

Recovering from lower back pain that has been going on for a long time is a continual process. Often times, your pain will never fully go away. The process is a multi-modal approach to addressing the many causes of neck or low back pain a patient is experiencing and optimizing their function. The goal of the whole process is to better help you understand why you hurt, what things you can do to better manage what is going on, and better function despite hurting

WHAT CAN I DO TO FEEL BETTER?

Physical Therapy: A physical therapist can help you better understand why you hurt. They can also help you become more flexible and stronger. Most importantly, a physical therapist can help you be in control of your pain, rather than the other way around. This is a process that takes time, often 2-3 months. But time and again, it has been shown to help.

Activity Modification: Avoid lifting, bending, twisting or other provoking motions.

Medications: These are a short-term solution to help with inflammation and spasms. These aren't good long-term solutions. Options can include NSAIDs, acetaminophen, and muscle relaxants.

Regular Exercise: Regular aerobic exercise (exercise that gets your heart rate up), is a super food for lower back pain. And it doesn't necessarily have to be something strenuous like running. Your physical therapist can help you build a plan to gradually increase your exercise in a way that is enjoyable and practical.

Lifestyle Modifications: Smoking cessation, weight loss, healthy diet, good sleep, exercise, stress reduction (see below) all can help.

HOW DOES PHYSICAL THERAPY HELP?

Physical therapists (PTs) are trained in human movement and can analyze your movement to determine what may be causing a problem. Your evaluation will determine a treatment plan that will be individualized specifically to you. It is important to know that movement does not harm you! The bulk of your physical therapy treatment will consist of exercises to help get your body moving with decreased symptoms. You will be responsible for doing these exercises independently at home and together with the supervision of your therapist. Other aspects of your treatment may include some "hands on" work by your therapist to help decrease muscle spasm or joint mobilization to decrease pain and improvement. In some cases when appropriate, therapy can offer the use of pain modalities such as heat which may provide some relief. These are meant to be temporary as you progress in your care.

CAN I DO ALL THE OTHER STUFF AND SKIP THE LIFESTYLE MODIFICATIONS?

We believe that patients get the best results when they make necessary lifestyle modifications to help their neck and back recover. Here are the lifestyle modifications to consider:

Smoking cessation

Weight loss

Healthy diet

Good sleep

Exercise

Reduce stress

These changes can be really hard, but we think the best results happen in people who take their health very, very seriously. We can't control everything that happens with our bodies, but we want to optimize the factors that we can control.

WHAT ELSE CAN I TRY?

There are other options to try that have some evidence regarding their efficacy. Chiropractic therapy, steroids injections, yoga, pilates, massage, acupuncture, and cognitive behavioral therapy all can have a role at times during the treatment of chronic neck or low back pain.

MY MRI LOOKED REALLY, REALLY BAD... DOES THAT MEAN I NEED A SURGERY TO FIX IT?

This is a really common question. Many patients after seeing their own MRI that shows signs of aging wear and tear in the back (including bulging discs, herniated discs, degenerative disc disease, bone on bone arthritis) assume that they must need a surgery to fix it in order for the pain to go away. In general, surgery is not the recommended treatment and many studies have shown surgery attempting to reduce pain by fixing these problems does not work very well.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT CHRONIC PAIN?

Why Do I Hurt? By Adriaan Louw

The American Chronic Pain Association website:
<https://www.theacpa.org/pain-management-tools/>

Understanding Pain In Less Than 5 Minutes, and What To Do About It! (YouTube Video)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_3phB93rvI