

Controlling Back Pain

By: JOEL HIRSCHBERG, MD MEDICAL DIRECTOR ARTHRITIS EDUCATION PROGRAM EISENHOWER MEDICAL CENTER



Inhibited mobility and increased stiffness are common symptoms of back pain, particularly pain due to arthritis.

Back pain is a common health problem, afflicting 50 to 80 percent of adults, yet many people do not associate the pain with arthritis. A common assumption is that arthritis largely afflicts the fingers, knuckles and knees, but arthritis is a common cause of back pain as well. While a number of causes for back pain are possible, various forms of arthritis often are common denominators among back pain patients, including osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis.

Inhibited mobility and increased stiffness are common symptoms of back pain, particularly pain due to arthritis. Roughly one in 10 Americans will experience back pain in any given year, and age is no predictor — back pain or related symptoms can occur at any age in both men and women.

In the January 2006 issue of *Arthritis & Rheumatism*, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released estimates for physician-diagnosed cases of arthritis that increase from the current 46 million cases to 67 million cases by 2030. This estimate reinforces the importance of lifestyle changes and self-management for people with all types of arthritis, including cases affecting the back. Maintaining a healthy weight and exercising regularly are two important steps to help people with arthritis and those at-risk of developing arthritis.

While giving the body the opportunity to rest and restricting movement are prudent for calming back pain, movement is still a vital part of reducing the pain. People suffering from back pain due to arthritis can benefit from regular, moderate exercise, which can reduce joint pain and stiffness, strengthen muscle around the joints and increase flexibility to keep the back strong and limber. A sensible program includes stretching, walking for a minimum of 30 minutes three times a week, strengthening the abdominal muscles for back support, and a cool-down stretch.

Depending on the severity of pain, a physician may recommend a water exercise program to reduce stress on the joints and spine. Exercise in warm water allows the muscles to relax. In addition, the water acts as resistance, building muscle strength. Movement is beneficial, and exercise will aid in the body's release of its own natural painkillers in the form of endorphins.

Other sensible choices besides weight management and exercise that will help with the overall control of back pain include smoking cessation, physical therapy and relaxing massages. Studies have found that dry or moist heat can aid in relieving back pain in a similar fashion to some pain relievers. Continuous lowlevel heat through a heat pack for a period of eight hours can offer relief from stiffness and pain over the course of the day.

Often, low back pain improves within days or weeks with minimal treatment. Ongoing back pain requires thoughtful attention to one's body and continuous self-management in addition to any recommendations made by a physician. Pain medications, such as antiinflammatory drugs and muscle relaxants may offer relief, which can be helpful in maintaining an exercise program and keeping the body in motion.