

Back Pain Got You Backed Into a Corner?

By Susan Jackson Grubb

More than 65 million Americans suffer from low back pain every year. Low back pain ranks with cardiovascular diseases and mental illnesses as a major cause of the escalation of health care costs.

After cold and flu symptoms, backaches are the most common reason for doctor visits.

Back pain costs approximately \$90 billion annually in health-care expenses.

Absenteeism, lost wages and reduced productivity are extremely costly to people, companies, and corporations. Insurance and workers' compensation costs continue to escalate.

It is estimated that 80 – 95% of Americans will experience back pain at some time in their lives. Roughly half of those who suffer from an episode will have another occurrence within one year.

The vital structures of the low back influence the well being of an individual. They regulate the functions and affect the health of the abdominal and pelvic organs and muscles, joints, and bones of the legs. Unlike other body parts, the low back also cushions the weight of the upper body as a person bends, twists, walks, runs, or performs the activities of daily living. As a result, the back tissues are constantly subjected to

varying strains and, in certain settings, they can be sprained and injured leading to inflammations and pain.

Although back pain can be debilitating, conservative treatment is the most likely course of action. Physicians usually recommend 8 to 12 weeks of conservative therapy before considering surgery.

In the United States, massage therapy is seen as an alternative or complementary treatment. If an injury is related to work, Workers' Compensation may reimburse for it. On the European continent, however, it is considered a conventional treatment, particularly for back pain. For example, in Austria, 87% of patients with back pain receive (and are usually reimbursed for) massage therapy.

Studies show that massage therapy is effective for relieving symptoms and increasing function among people with chronic back pain. The Touch Research Institute in conjunction with the Miami School of Medicine found that adults with chronic low-back pain found relief from massage therapy. Massage eased pain, reduced depression and anxiety, and improved sleep and range of motion. It also positively affected the biochemical system of the body by increasing serotonin and dopamine levels.

The authors of this study wrote that future studies might “examine the impact of massage therapy on job productivity and absenteeism for individuals with chronic low back problems.”

According to a recent research study conducted by the Center for Health Studies in Seattle, Washington, a 10-week program of massage therapy using Swedish and deep-tissue massage was found to be the most effective of the three treatments studied – massage therapy, acupuncture, and self-care education. After one year, the massage group still reported the greatest benefit.

“The findings that the benefits of massage therapy persist well beyond the last treatment and the suggestion of possible reductions in subsequent health care utilization, make massage therapy a high priority for further study,” the authors wrote.

How does Swedish massage work? The mechanical action of the hands on the skin and the structures beneath it enhances circulation of blood and lymph fluid resulting in an increased supply of oxygen and the removal of waste products, or mediators of pain, to the area. Certain Swedish massage techniques have been shown to increase the pain threshold and relax tight muscles. It can relax the mind and reduce anxiety, which also affects the perception of pain positively.

What about deep-tissue massage? One of the more popular forms of deep-tissue massage is a form of medical massage called neuromuscular therapy or trigger point therapy. The American Academy of Pain Management recognizes this form of massage therapy as an effective treatment for back pain caused by soft tissue injury (such as muscle strain).

Neuromuscular therapy consists of alternating levels of concentrated pressure on the areas of muscle spasm. Muscles that are in spasm will be painful to the touch. This is because they are ischemic. Ischemia means the muscle is lacking proper blood flow, usually due to the muscle spasm. At this point, it is extremely important to communicate with the massage therapist regarding the pressure – whether it is too much, too little, getting better, or getting worse. The therapist should listen and respond accordingly. The pressure should never be overly painful. In fact, most people describe it as “good pain.”

After the muscle tension is released, the muscle should start receiving enough blood and oxygen to remain noticeably relaxed for four to fourteen days after the session, depending on stress, activity level, and severity of back pain prior to beginning therapy. The length of time should increase as the muscle heals.

Massage therapy is relatively safe, provided that the therapist is well-trained. To find a well-trained massage therapist, ask the therapist about their education. In Colorado, a massage therapist should have graduated from a school of massage therapy accredited by the state in which it is located with at least 500 hours of training. No school or less training is a red flag.

Some massage therapy organizations list trained therapists on their websites. Both the American Massage Therapy Association www.amtamassage.org and Associated Bodyworkers and Massage Professionals www.abmp.org have such listings.

About the Author:

Susan Jackson Grubb, President of Center for Neuromuscular Massage Therapy, Inc. in the Cherry Creek area of Denver is a graduate of the Boulder College of Massage Therapy and has been a massage therapist since 1984. All nine therapists at the center are graduates of massage therapy schools -- each with twice the state requirement for training, are nationally certified, are licensed with the City and County of Denver, and are members of the American Massage Therapy Association. For more information visit www.cnmtmassage.com