

Back pain is very common with as many as 80% of Americans having symptoms of low back pain (LBP) during their lifetime. LBP is the leading cause of injury and disability for those younger than 45 years of age and the third most prevalent impairment for those 45 years or older. It may present as an inconvenient ache, or a disabling, severe pain. Whatever form it takes, there is evidence that indicates patients who are more informed about their low back pain may recover from their injury more quickly.



## Common Causes

Some of the common pain patterns are:

**Pain with sitting, bending or lifting** (flexion disorder): pain with rising from sitting, forward-bending, squatting and coughing/sneezing: This disorder is most likely to involve the ligaments of the intervertebral disc, or the disc itself. If severe, it can also cause pressure on the nerves as they exit the spine, leading to radicular leg pain (sciatica). Muscle spasm will often accompany flexion disorders if the pain is severe. A herniated disc is the most severe form of flexion disorder, and degenerative disc disease is often the diagnosis associated with prolonged, chronic changes to the disc. Joints that do not have enough movement into flexion can also cause pain as they are stretched beyond their limit.

**Pain with standing, walking, backward bending** (extension disorder): Long periods of standing with poor posture (excessive lordosis or swayback) can lead to increased compression of the facet joints of the spine. These facet joints can become progressively more inflamed and produce pain in a variety of positions, but pain remains worst in standing or with arching of the back. Chronic strain to the facet joints of the back can lead to degeneration and osteoarthritis over time. This, in turn, can lead to osteophytes (bone spurs) which can limit movement and impinge the nerves, producing radicular (sciatic) pain into the leg(s). Joints that do not have enough movement into extension may also produce similar symptoms.

# BACK PAIN GUIDE

**Pain with simple movements, reaching, twisting or quick movements** (instability disorder): When the muscles of the back are not controlling its movements, then strain can be passed onto the joints, ligaments and discs leading to pain in most postures and most activities. This pain can be difficult to localize as it usually affects different levels and different structures of the spine.

## Treatment

Although accurate diagnosis of back pain often requires expensive tests, Physical Therapists use their expert understanding of biomechanics, patterns of pain, and pain response to activities and postures to establish the most likely cause of your back pain. Along with a comprehensive physical assessment, knowledge of how your pain presents will often allow the Physical Therapist to make a diagnosis about the cause of your pain and the structure(s) involved.

These pain disorders can all be improved with conservative treatment (rest, physical therapy, medication) if they are addressed early, and the structures involved have not been permanently damaged. Even a back with 'arthritis' can be improved with a targeted treatment plan. This plan may involve:

**Manual therapy** – Most patients with moderate to severe pain will have muscle spasm or over-activity in some of the back muscles, leading to secondary pain which can often be eased with massage or trigger point release. Some back pain is caused by joints that are not moving well, and so joint mobilization (and occasionally manipulations or adjustments) can be used to normalize their motion.

**Therapeutic exercise** – The muscles and joints of the body (the musculoskeletal system) work together to produce our desired postures and movements. If the muscles are not controlling the joints well, then strain, and subsequently injury, can result. Guided, therapeutic exercise will give the muscles and joints a chance to work together again to allow the body to heal.

**Modalities** – Pain can get in the way of the above treatments, and so modalities such as electrical stimulation (TENS) and heat/ice can be used to relieve this pain.

**Education** – In some cases, the most important feature of treatment. It should be the goal of all health professionals to teach the patient exactly what they need to do for themselves to get over their back pain, and, if possible, prevent future occurrences. This might include education of the injury mechanism, exercise instruction, lifestyle and work modifications and self treatment options.

Most insurance carriers do not require a doctor's referral for you to commence treatment at Physical Therapy of Idaho. We can usually get you in for your evaluation within 24 hours of calling for an appointment, so relief may be only a phone call away. Our physical therapists have between 10 and 20 years of experience in treating low back pain, so let us help you get you back to your best, pain free. Call us today!

