

Family Medicine Clerkship Plain Language Summary

Title: Treatment of Chronic Low Back Pain

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Plain Language Summary:

Back pain is something that affects nearly all people at some point in their lives. It is also one of the most common reasons to go to the doctor. Low back pain can occur anywhere between the ribs and the legs and generally starts when someone lifts something, twists, turns, or bends. The pain can have many causes and the doctor does not always need to know which one. Sometimes it happens from overuse, strain, injury, infection, aging joints, medical problems like cancer, or a herniated disc. A herniated disc is when the shock absorbers for the bones of your back become old and break. Sometimes when they break they pinch nerves that exit your back on their way to your legs. This can cause you to lose feeling in your legs, have tingling or burning in your legs, or even loss of bladder and bowel control. You need to see a doctor right away if that happens. Other reasons to go to the doctor are feeling sick, fevers, weight loss, pain that wakes you up at night, pain that does not go away in a few weeks, or very severe pain.

Fortunately, acute back pain usually goes away on its own in a few weeks. The best initial treatment is avoiding activity for one or two days, then start very slow activities to strengthen and stretch your back. Over-the-counter pain medications such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen are usually enough, but your doctor can prescribe stronger medications if necessary. Other treatments your doctor may suggest include creams to numb your back, physical therapy exercises, yoga, injecting medicine with a needle into your back to decrease swelling, and if nothing else works then surgery is sometimes helpful to relieve the pain.

Back pain lasting three months it is called chronic back pain. Many studies have shown that yoga is helpful for people with chronic back pain. It lets them use less pain medications, lets them do more things without pain, and it decreases their pain. One study published in 2011 compared how well yoga, other stretching exercises, and reading a “back pain” book helps patients. It showed good evidence that yoga classes and stretching exercise classes for 12 weeks were better than giving people a book about back pain. The patients in the classes had less pain and the pain didn’t prevent them from doing as many normal activities. The yoga and the stretching exercise classes gave the same benefits, so you could choose the best class for you. The study had some special circumstances, however, including classes taught by physical therapists, classes designed for people with back pain, and none of the patients in the study had depression, back surgeries in the past, or other medical reasons for the pain. For these reasons the classes may not be the right therapy for you and you should ask your doctor before starting a class.

Additional Resources:

Medline plus: Chronic Low Back Pain

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/007422.htm>

WebMD: Low Back Pain

<http://www.webmd.com/back-pain/tc/low-back-pain-topic-overview>

Mayo Clinic Health: Back pain

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/back-pain/DS00171>

Key Words:

treatment

Yoga

Chronic

Back

Pain

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