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HEALTH - Don't like chronic back pain become a vicious cycle

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By Gita Mikal

You injured your back a year ago lifting boxes, the pain went away with a few Tylenols and rest, but why is your pain coming back every now and then? You may have developed chronic or persistent pain.



Photo: Stock image Get control of your back pain.

In fact, eight in 10 people suffer from low back pain at some point in their lives. Research shows that low back pain is the second most common reason for visiting a doctor's office in North America, only after upper-respiratory infections.

Depending on how long the pain lasts, we call it acute or chronic pain. Acute low back pain is shorter lived and more common. Most acute episodes of back pain can be managed by yourself, keep moving and continue with your day-to-day activities and include some rest periods and take a few pain killers if necessary. Just remember, pain with movement does not mean that you are damaging your back.

Unless there are reasons to suggest more serious conditions, the guidelines for treating low back pain do not recommend taking X-rays or any other medical interventions. However, if acute low back pain persists longer than a week or you develop noticeable numbness or muscle weakness in your legs, visit your family physician, physiotherapist or chiropractor for a more detailed examination.

Chronic or persistent pain is when pain lasts longer than three months. Chronic pain is a more complex condition and would require a different approach.

It is more than just an inconvenience. It can make daily activities painfully challenging and limit your ability to enjoy your social life. You may find it difficult to play with your children, complete tasks at home or work and it may even confine you to staying indoors. And, that's not all, many individuals cut back on physical activity. This leads to muscle weakness, which causes more pain and weakness. This triggers a vicious cycle that grows worse with each passing day.

In a number of people, low back pain is accompanied by nerve root pain, often called sciatica. Nerve root pain means that a nerve is irritated or pressed on. This can be because of a disc pressing on the nerve root or simply due to muscle spasm compressing the nerve. Pain usually travels down the leg and can also cause pins and needles, numbness or weakness in part of a buttock, leg or foot.

In rare cases, bone disorders, tumors, infections and pressure from structures near to the spine can cause acute or chronic lower back pain. Detailed clinical and diagnostic examinations are usually performed and referral to a specialist is usually made by family physicians.

Regardless of what is causing your lower back pain, understanding your pain, learning how to properly exercise to strengthen your core and leg muscles and learning how to prevent injuries while staying active are important parts of your management plan. Physiotherapists, chiropractors and osteopaths are highly trained practitioners to assist you in understanding the cause of your pain and helping you to manage it properly and prevent recurrence.

A combination of manual therapy, massage, exercise and education on pain management is usually a part of your physiotherapy program.

Here are some tips to prevent low back pain:

- When lifting an object, bend at your knees, not your back. Be sure to squat with the correct technique to pick up an object. Keep your back straight and keep the object close to your body.
- Avoid twisting your body while lifting anything.
- When sitting, make sure your feet are flat on the floor and your back is straight.
- Avoid sitting for long periods of time. If you must, make sure you stand up and stretch frequently.
- The right footwear can protect your spine. Flats or low heels are safer than high heels.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Avoid sitting on the couch for too long, since it de-conditions the muscles surrounding your spine.
- Exercise regularly. Increasing muscle strength with the right exercises will minimize pain and injury.

Gita Mikal is the founder of Pain Management & Fibromyalgia Centre and Physiotherapy at Don Mills. Gita is a practicing physiotherapist with post-graduate training in pain management. She incorporates a variety of therapeutic techniques such as manual therapy, acupuncture and pain education in her treatments. Visit www.physioatdonmills.com, or call 416-444-4800.

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