



BACK TO GOOD

Changing treatments for back pain

Story by Amanda N. Wegner / Photos by Shanna Wolf

It's estimated that some 80 percent of Americans will experience back pain in their lifetime. Including Lesly Oxley. She fell while waitressing at 18, and off a ladder at 19; she has had back pain intermittently ever since. Her mother has degenerative spinal stenosis, and late last year Lesly was diagnosed with sacroilitis.

It gradually grew worse. "Over the past two years or so, I have had chronic lower back and hip pain," says Lesly. "I sort of accepted it as a reality."

But living with back pain needn't be reality.

Changing the approach

There have been "a lot of changes in the last year in terms of how we treat back pain," says Dr. Luke Fortney, an integrative medicine physician with UW Health. "Research shows that how we've been treating back pain is neither helpful nor evidence-based. Basically, we're not doing a very good job."

In Dr. Fortney's integrative practice, he sidelines conventional treatments including injections, X-rays, MRIs, pharmaceuticals, even surgery, as the majority of back pain is myofascial, involving the muscles and tendons. While a neurological and physical exam will rule out serious problems, myofascial issues typically respond well to physical therapy, hands-on osteopathic manipulation therapy, chiropractic, even exercise.

Another part of the equation, he notes, may be stress reduction. Stress can

manifest physically in the body, and the back is a prime spot for that. “Pain is just one way the body responds to stress. We’re learning more and more about the connections between the mind and body.”

Mind + body = back

Drawing on the mind-body connection, exercise is often the first recommendation Dr. Fortney makes.

“Do the exercise you like to do and will do. Move anytime and anywhere. Sweat, get your heart rate up and breath deeper.” He’s also particularly fond of gentle yoga and Pilates for stretching, strengthening and relaxing. Plus with Pilates you get the added benefit of focused abdominal and back strengthening exercises and poses, key to preventing future problems.

Lesly has added yoga to her back-care routine and has consulted with a knowledgeable Registered Yoga Teacher to learn what poses can specifically help release her low back and hips. “Yoga helps quite a bit for relief,” says Lesly. “There are poses that stretch the right spots and help me identify exactly where the pain is located.”

Marty Tribble knows how powerful yoga can be for healing the body. In fact, she was drawn to the practice after learning the “exercises” a physical therapist had prescribed for her own back injury were yoga poses. “It worked for my back pain, and the benefits spill over into other parts of your life,” says Marty, RYT. “You can take control of your own physical health with yoga.”

Marty is offering a new class, Yoga for Back Care, Tuesdays from 9 to 10 a.m. at Body in Balance, 6333 Odana Road. This is class is open and accessible to anyone, whether they want to relieve current back pain or prevent it.

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Massage and myofascial release also offer relief. And though it's not covered by many insurance plans, acupuncture is popular. Eastern medicine, including acupuncture, works with a system of energy channels that course throughout; a blockage in a channel can cause pain in the body, says Kathleen Norris, who practices Japanese-style acupuncture at Isthmus Acupuncture Center.

Because these channels form an interconnected web, "quite often, there are numerous approaches to treat one problem." The hands and feet, for instance, are "powerful points for the back," so she may insert fine needles there. For someone unfamiliar with acupuncture, its dynamic, indirect nature may be puzzling. Kathleen suggests at least four visits to determine how well acupuncture is working for your condition. It can be used in conjunction with Western medicine, and Dr. Fortney notes, "There is good evidence showing acupuncture's benefits."

There is an answer

These are just a few of the options available to the four in five Americans coping with back pain. From peppermint essential oil (an anti-inflammatory), to magnesium (magnesium-deficiency can lead to muscular problems) to localized Botox injections to calm muscle spasms, there is a spectrum of treatments to meet any back pain sufferer's needs and desires. But you have to take the first step.

"You don't just have to live with it," says Lesly. "Early intervention is the key to prevention. I know, it's a cliché, but it's true." *mb*

Amanda N. Wegner writes for a number of local, regional and national publications.

BOTOX FOR BACK PAIN

Known for its muscle-relaxing properties, Botox injections can provide temporary relief for low-back pain. Because this is a newer use of Botox, it's still used on a "trial and error basis," says Dr. Jim Leonard, UW Health Spine Clinic and Rehabilitative Medicine. At present, he says it's an option for individuals "who are not surgical candidates and have tried the other standard treatments, but still have not gotten relief."

Botox is not a cure, but for short-term pain relief. He notes that injections are proving to be better for neck pain and headaches than low-back pain, but remain a viable option. Additionally, Botox for pain relief is not uniformly covered by insurance.

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