

Pain in the Back

The back is a frequent cause of pain, disability and reduced quality of life. The lumbar spine functions to support the body and helps transmit energy from the lower to the upper body. The back contains the bony spine, which encloses and protects the spinal nerves. The back also contains joints, muscles, ligaments, discs, nerves and other structures.

Due to the complex anatomy and function of the neck, there are **multiple potential causes of pain**. This may include structures from within or outside of the spine. A thorough medical and functional evaluation is necessary to determine what is (and what is not) causing the pain.

Pain in the back is often related to the spine and can result from an obvious traumatic event (such as lifting a heavy object) or more subtle causes such as repetitive awkward positioning (such as lifting an object many times in an awkward position) or gradual degenerative changes. The pain can be caused by muscle, facet joint (the very small joints in the back of the spine), nerve or disc problems.

Back pain can radiate or refer to other regions of the body, usually the buttock or lower extremity. Pain, tingling or numbness in buttock and into the groin, leg, and foot is common. Occasionally weakness and sensory loss will be present.

In order to treat back pain, the **structures causing the pain must be identified**. It is also important to learn why those structures are not functioning normally. This is done by a thorough patient history and physical exam. Pictures of the back such as X-rays and MRIs, and nerve tests often help the physician make the diagnosis. Often, spinal and muscular injections provide diagnostic, as well as therapeutic benefit.

Once a diagnosis has been made, the primary goal of treating back pain is improving overall function. While treatment is focused on the back, functional improvement concerns the patient as a whole. This can include issues such as posture, sleep, anxiety or depression, relationships and employment. Pain reduction is a means to achieving improved function and quality of life.

Much of the functional improvement will be taught and achieved during **formal therapy sessions (primarily physical and occupational)**. The patient should progress through an exercise program with the **goal of becoming independent with a home exercise program**.

If pain is interfering with your progression toward optimal function, multiple **options for pain relief** can be considered. Options include medications, manual treatment (manipulation, massage, muscle energy techniques, etc.), modalities (ice, heat, ultrasound), acupuncture, muscle and spinal injections and sometimes, surgery. As mentioned above, appropriate treatment can only occur after making a specific diagnosis.

Many people improve within a few months of conservative treatment. For those who do not, it is important to maintain function while proceeding to more aggressive treatment options