5 Myths About Back Pain Debunked

by LUISITO BATONGBAKAL

Back Pain Myths – Debunked

Back pain is one of the leading causes of disability in the U.S. In fact, it is estimated that 80% of Americans will experience back pain at some point in their lives. Since it is a common health issue, we are going to take a look at back pain myths to set the symptoms and causes right.

Despite the scientific advancements that are bringing us closer to the possibilities of cloning and space travel, back pain remains a puzzle yet to be solved. Lack of available knowledge is certainly not the culprit. The internet age has opened the floodgates of information to everyone, so the answers even to the most basic back pain questions can be just a few searches away. The immense number of answers available makes it difficult to find advice that is both reliable and based on legitimate scientific evidence. However, the internet should not take all the blame.

Back pain is a multifaceted condition, and different patients need different treatment approach. Unfortunately, medical professionals are in disharmony when it comes to back pain treatments being prescribed, with some of them giving medications to patients who should not receive them in the first place.

In other words, both patients and the medical community are prone to misinformation. For you to achieve the best treatment outcomes, you need to be an informed patient rather than a passive one. This is why it is essential to know how to separate facts from long-held myths about back pain.

1. Bed Rest is Good for Back Pain

If you have ever watched a zombie-themed movie, the primary rule of survival is always to keep moving instead of staying in one place. The same principle applies to back pain: Doing your usual activities is better than lying in bed all day.

Dr. Stuart McGill, a spine biomechanics professor with over three decades of experience, likens our spine to a fluid-filled balloon.

Every morning, we are all naturally taller because the spinal discs between our vertebrae are filled with fluid, which serves as a cushion and source of nourishment. This fluid seeps out of the discs once you rise from the bed, restoring your natural height.

While this phenomenon is inevitable for anyone who sleeps at least eight hours, problems arise when you stay in the horizontal position longer. The swelling spinal disks will not have time to unload, leading to compression of your spinal nerves and a more painful back.

For severe cases of back pain, bed rest is allowed as long as it does not last longer than a day. The ideal sleeping positions for back pain involve to either laying on your side with a pillow between the knees or laying on

your back with a pillow behind the knees and with your head and shoulders elevated.

2. Exercise Causes Back Pain

The same people who believe bed rest is best for back pain also use it as an excuse not to exercise. But nothing can be further from the truth: Studies show that keeping your body moving is better for your back than not moving at all.

As Dr. Neel Anand of the Cedars-Sinai Institute for Spinal Disorders recommends, preference should be given to exercises that strengthen your core, meaning your stomach and back muscles. Of course, stretching and warm-up exercises must be performed before any physical activity to condition your muscles and avoid unnecessary injuries.

No type of exercise is superior to others. Whether it is cardio or resistance training, you can choose what you enjoy the most as long as you do it within the limits of your pain. Gradually increase the intensity as your condition improves.

3. Imaging Can Identify the Cause of Back Pain

Back pain is more complicated than most people think. It's so complicated than even the best imaging modalities just cannot keep up.

An MRI scan, CT scan, or X-ray images may be designed to visualize what is inside you, but they cannot always identify what is wrong with you. In the case of back pain, these imaging technologies are not advanced enough to isolate muscle spasms or strains that might be causing the pain.

Imaging modalities can only provide the best visualization of your inner body but not the best diagnosis. Also, the spinal abnormalities usually detected by these imaging techniques are associated with aging and can be found even in people with no back pain symptoms.

Relying on images alone not only leads to misdiagnosis, but also too costly treatments that can be replaced by safer, cheaper alternatives. For this reason, MRI scan is only recommended for patients before a major surgery while x-rays are for those who recently sustained injuries from falls or automobile accidents.

4. Severe Back Pain Requires Surgery

There's no correlation between back pain and severity of the underlying condition. Patients with cancer may not feel any symptoms while those with spasms or minor injuries may complain of an almost debilitating back pain.

Therefore, the patient's subjective score on the pain scale should never be the basis for considering surgical procedures like spinal fusion. After all, most cases of back pain are too vague that identifying the precise cause is not as straightforward as any doctor would hope.

A herniated disc, for instance, does not show back pain symptoms all the time. For every 10% of people who are good candidates for surgery, 90% have herniated discs naturally shrink on their own within a few weeks. As a rule of the thumb, surgery should only be considered as a last resort.

5. Medications are the First Choice of Treatment for Back Pain.

Bad news for those who self-medicate: Painkillers are not the ultimate back pain cure. In fact, they may not be a cure at all.

In its latest guidelines, the American College of Physicians shatters the long-standing practice of using drugs to ease back pain and now recommends the use of natural alternative methods instead.

The guidelines are based on several studies that underscore the inefficiency of medications — prescribed or over-the-counter — in alleviating back pain. Instead of acting as a solution, prescription drugs like opioids have paved the way for equally problematic issues of drug addiction and dependency.

Back pain, according to the proponents of the new guidelines, can be compared to the common cold. While it is very irritating, a common cold gradually goes away not with medications, but with proper rest and hydration.

This is true for acute lower back pain. An overuse or strain injury that generally disappears after four weeks. For both acute and chronic back pain, experts recommend using non-invasive, nonpharmacologic methods first, ranging from massage and mindfulness meditation to exercise and heat therapy.

If you insist on using medications for your back pain, you can try over-the-counter drugs, like aspirin. Less effective options must be avoided, including acetaminophen and steroid injections.

In Conclusion...

I hope this information cleared up the most popular of back pain myths for you. If you are experiencing back pain, talk to your doctor, and they will create a treatment plan to help you manage your back pain symptoms and additional resources.