4 Common Types of Back Pain

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Types of Back Pain

Did you know that back pain is extremely common? Though it may sometimes seem we are struggling alone, there are many others who know what we are going through; in fact, worldwide, back pain is the single leading cause of disability. It is one of the most common causes for missed work, and it accounts for about 264 million lost workdays per year, which equates to about two workdays per full-time worker. That is a lot of back pain. So, let's dive into the different types of back pain and their symptoms.

What is Back Pain?

Back pain, simply defined, is pain that is experienced in the back. It can be experienced in any area of the back, and there are many reasons why it may occur.

Symptoms include back pain in various locations. Other symptoms may include:

- Muscle aches.
- Shooting and stabbing pain.
- Pain that radiates down the legs.
- Pain that worsens with standing, walking, bending or lifting.
- Pain that improves with reclining.

The symptoms listed above will vary depending on the type of back pain experienced, as well as the location of the back pain.

4 Commonly Experienced Types of Back Pain

There are many types of back pain; the trick is to determine which type is being experienced by the patient so the proper treatment can be prescribed.

1. Non-Specific Muscular Pain

This is the most common type of back pain. This type of back pain encompasses most acute injuries, such as muscle strains. It is most often caused by sudden, unexpected movements such as falls, twisting, lifting and movements that put pressure on the back.

2. Muscle Spasms

These occur when the muscles of the back contract involuntarily. This type of back pain often occurs as a result of heavy lifting and bending; it often occurs after a specific event and will most often become an acute injury rather than a chronic injury.

3. Radicular Pain

This is back pain that is caused by two factors — degeneration of the discs and pinching of nerve roots. Dr. Michael Ashburn of Penn Medicine states, "patients who are experiencing radicular pain will often experience a sharp shooting pain that starts in the back and goes into one or both legs. They also may feel numbness or tingling in their legs." Sciatica is a type of radicular pain.

4. Arthritis

Arthritis may cause back pain. We're most familiar with arthritis affecting the large joints of the body, such as the knees, but arthritis can — and often does — affect the back. The discs dry out, meaning that they can rupture easier. There is also less movement in the spine, and the vertebrae may begin to move against each other and cause pain.

How to Reduce Back Pain

It is important to treat back pain correctly. Acute injuries may require rest — certainly a strain may heal appropriately with a little tender love and care. However, other types of back injuries may require more aggressive techniques. Not treating back pain can reduce mobility and quality of life.

Physical Therapy

Physical therapy is often one of the first treatments for chronic back pain. Why? Exercise can help to improve posture, core strength, flexibility and pain tolerance — all of which may improve pain overall.

Meditation

Mindfulness and meditation are treatment options that can be taught by a therapist, or it is something that can be worked on at home. Mindfulness and meditation don't actually stop pain from occurring, but they can help the brain stop focusing on the pain. Options include meditation with guided apps and recordings, yoga, tai chi, etc.

Injections

Injections, such as nerve blocks, epidural steroid injections and nerve ablations, may all be used to treat chronic back pain. All work on different mechanisms, but the pain source must be known in order for the treatment to be effective. These are also non-permanent treatment options and only reduce pain for a certain period of time.

Medication

Pharmacologic treatments may be prescribed, such as over-the-counter medications and prescription medications . Don't expect a prescription for opioids unless the back pain is acute or other treatment options have failed.

When to See a Doctor for Back Pain

Back pain can typically be treated at home with conservative measures such as rest and ice. Back pain that doesn't improve or is severe in nature should be evaluated by a healthcare provider. Back pain that becomes chronic should also be evaluated by a healthcare provider.

Back pain typically is not an emergency. However, there are circumstances when back pain can signal a worsening health condition. Contact your healthcare provider or seek emergency medical attention if back pain is accompanied by the following symptoms:

- Bladder or bowel problems.
- Fever.
- Follows a fall, a blow to the back or an injury.

- Becomes severe and doesn’t improve with rest.
- Pain spreads down both legs, especially below the knees.
- Weakness, numbness and tingling in one or both legs.
- Unexplained weight loss.