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Ease Back Pain with Yoga Therapy

Low back pain is a common problem and the second leading symptom for which people consult their healthcare provider. Low back pain can be caused by a known injury or activity and resolve on its own in a matter of days, but for many it can be chronic, lasting months or years. Disorders of the lower back are the leading cause of disability in those younger than 45 years of age. It has been estimated that mechanical disorders of the spine, (problems with function) represent at least 98% of low back pain.

The back structure is complicated with many inter-related components. The spine consists not only of the bony vertebrae but the fibrous disk located between each vertebra. The spine protects the spinal cord. There are layers of muscles, nerves, connective tissue and other bony structures like the pelvis to support the back. These collective structures afford us the ability to stand erect and move. In fact, activities of daily life, such as walking, move the spine through cycles of compression and decompression, which help lubricate the bony structures and provide nutrients to the disks. Sitting on the other hand, is only compressive and chronic compression can lead to pain.

It is no wonder that up to 80% of low back pain is termed “non-specific”, meaning the cause is uncertain. Many with severe pain will have normal findings on an MRI (magnetic resonance image) and interestingly, it has been demonstrated a random selection of 100 middle-aged people who have NO back problems, one third of them will have abnormal results on an MRI!

Factors that predispose someone to low back dysfunction and pain can be categorized as;

Functional: problems with posture, muscle imbalances, de-conditioning, fatigue, altered movement patterns, or emotional tension.

Structural: congenital anomaly, vascular disease, tumors, or referred pain from pelvic or abdominal disorders.

A visit to your healthcare provider can help you sort through the likely cause of your back pain and make recommendations for a resolution, especially if an injury is clear cut. Unfortunately, many have recurrent or chronic pain which represents a challenge for both the provider and patient. Patients are often placed on addictive pain relievers and other medications which do not support healthy healing. Their pain relief is usually temporary and there is potential they will suffer from side effects to the medications.

Exercise has been shown to be effective to relief back pain but the results are variable. A study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* 2005;143:849-856, demonstrated the benefits of yoga in relieving pain as compared to more traditional exercise or an educational self-care book. Yoga is an ancient science of healing and regular practice promotes health with a holistic, mind-body and therapeutic approach. Doing yoga cultivates a balance between the flexibility and strength of the muscles of the body and develops body awareness to alignment, all which are crucial to support a healthy back. Unique to yoga is the incorporation of breathing techniques to relieve stress and to guide one through a physical practice. A gentle flow of movement with the breath has profound healing effects on the body and mind. Here is what you need to know if you are interested in exploring yoga to relief back pain. There are many styles of yoga ranging from gentle to vigorous and not all are conducive for those suffering with back pain. Notably, hatha yoga focuses on physical postures that support alignment and a well trained, experienced teacher can guide you on a path of wellness and pain relief or at least aid in the management of. It is always appropriate to interview a prospective yoga teacher to ascertain their qualifications and to visit the studio. Many teachers offer private lessons to best assess individual needs. Other useful modalities include therapeutic massage, acupuncture, chiropractic care and physical therapy. Some seek modalities that “do” something to you or “for” you and while beneficial the results are often temporary.

The nature of chronic back pain encourages one to seek a modality of treatment that can be adapted to the activities of everyday life. Yoga offers a balanced approach that encourages you to honor your capabilities while exploring your edge in a practice that promotes self-healing. You do the practice, the practice does not do you! It takes willful determination to stop the vicious cycle of chronic pain...if you are one of the millions who suffer, why not give yoga a try!

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