

Keep back pain at bay

By Karen Kansler, R.N.

Special to the Review

If you're like me, you may suffer from frequent back pain that keeps you from doing the things you love. Simple actions such as walking, cooking or even dancing can trigger pain. Before I share some ways to help reduce back pain, let's start with a little anatomy lesson.

Spine Anatomy 101

Your back is composed of 24 movable vertebrae, which are held together by many muscles, tendons and nerves. In addition, the spine is curved like an "S," beginning from the neck at the cervical curve and ending at the sacral region, or tailbone. These curves help the body stay balanced, absorb shock and move freely. There are also nerves within the spinal cord, and they, too, help your back move and signal when you feel pain. Simply put, the back is complex, and it's important to strengthen and protect it.

Causes of back flare-ups

Now that you know about the spine, it's good to know how back pain starts. The biggest culprit is spinal stenosis or the narrowing of the spinal canal, the channel that holds the spinal cord and nerves. It can come from arthritis, heredity, inactivity or, most commonly, aging. It puts pressure on the nerves, causing inflammation and pain. It's very common in older adults because as we age, our bodies go through wear and tear, and some of us may have arthritis, osteoporosis or other conditions that affect our bones. People who smoke, are overweight or have strenuous jobs are also at risk of suffering back injuries. Lastly, physical and emotional stress can increase back pain. When your muscles tense up, you can't move freely and thus overwork the rest of your body. Red flags regarding back pain include loss of bowels/bladder control, leg weakness and/or cancer. These symptoms should be addressed by your doctor as soon as possible.

Back away from pain

After learning about back pain, you may be wondering if there's any relief in sight. Thankfully, you can prevent and relieve back pain. To start, you should maintain good posture to keep your back properly aligned. Just sit up straight and keep your shoulders back – it's that easy. Second, be mindful of ergonomics and proper body mechanics. In other words, pay careful attention to the way you position things and the way you move to lift or reach for those things. Bend your knees – not your back –

when lifting something and use your legs to raise yourself up. Stretching and regular exercise is so important for a strong, healthy spine. If you have medical problems, you can learn to strengthen your spine with the help of a physical therapist.

Ultimately, back pain not only can inhibit your range of motion, it can also disrupt your life. To help find relief, pay attention to your body, your surroundings and your habits. If back pain persists, talk with your health care provider about medications, injections, acupuncture or massage. These treatment options can help reduce pain, prevent injuries and protect your spine.

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