



SPINAL COLUMN

Newsletter

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UNDERSTANDING THE PAIN CYCLE

Back pain is a like a bad dream: The longer it goes on, the worse it gets. So your first goal is to find where you are on the pain cycle, and then to “wake yourself up” and stop the cycle as soon as possible.

What is pain? Pain comes after a muscle spasm suffocates your muscles and chokes off their oxygen. Early twinges of pain signal temporary changes in your back muscles, damage you can undo with exercise and relaxation. But let the pain continue for years and you set the stage for permanent back damage, which can never be fully repaired. Most people with back pain don’t need tons of “neither pain killing pills nor surgery,” and still have time to prevent permanent damage to their backs-if they act now, take control, and break the pain cycle.

Warning stage and signs:

1. **Inactivity and stress.** Being unfit and under stress sets the stage for back pain. Weak, stiff muscles can’t bounce back when they are hit with stress; instead, they go into spasm. Constant, unrelieved stress always takes its toll somewhere in the body-in this case your back.
2. **Muscle spasm.** One day, for “no reason at all,” you may feel a jabbing pain in your back-a muscle spasm. Your back muscles contract suddenly and painfully, a spasm is your body’s natural splinting reaction to prevent more damage to your back.

Danger zone

3. **Muscles can’t “breathe.”** A spasm chokes off circulation to your knotted muscle and cuts off its supply of oxygen-rich blood. Pain increases because the muscles can’t take oxygen to work smoothly, and because lactic acid and other waste products build up in the muscles.
4. **Stiff muscles.** Weeks of pain and inactivity lead to stiff, shortened muscles. Your spine is locked in place and can no longer move freely-and neither can you. When the back muscles can no longer protect the joints in your spine, the joints may degenerate quickly.

Permanent back damage

5. **Bone and disk disease.** Ignoring pain and stiffness sets the stage for permanent back damage. If you have degenerative disease in your vertebrae (the bones in your back) and disks (the cushions between the bones). Your doctor may recommend different type of treatments.
6. **Bed rest and worry.** Inactivity only prolongs the pain cycle, whether you’re resting in bed after surgery or relying on pain medication for relief. If you’re flat on your back in bed, your muscles get weaker and stiffer, worry and stress increases, and the cycle repeats itself.

In recent years there has been increased emphasis on prevention and general health promotion in order to reduce the incidence of low back pain. Exercise and facing stress (with a positive mental attitude) is one way in dealing with the problem. Another is chiropractic care, which appears to have a profound effect and excellent results in alleviating back pain.