

## Low Back Pain: The Full Story

Low back pain will affect virtually everyone at some point in their lives. In fact it's the second most frequent reason (behind the common cold) people go to see their primary care physician. Fortunately, not everyone with low back pain requires medical attention, but it's important that people understand the full story behind low back pain so they can determine whether or not to see a doctor.

### Common Thinking

- Nearly half of all patients with low back pain will improve within one week

### The Full Story

- Forty percent will have persistent complaints of pain at one and two-year follow-ups
- Sixty-two percent of patients will likely have one or more relapses during a one-year follow-up

### Common Thinking

- A majority of injured workers with low back pain will improve in six to twelve weeks

### The Full Story

- Low back pain is the #1 disability in people under 45, and the #3 disability in people over 45
- After six months on disability for low back pain, there is only a 50 percent chance of returning to your previous job
- After two years, there is little to no chance of returning to your previous job

### Common Thinking

- Almost all patients with low back pain improve without any medical care

### The Full Story

- Continued problems with low back pain are even more likely in patients who wait six to ten weeks from the first onset of pain before seeking medical care
- Eighty percent have pain at six-month and one-year follow-up appointments
- There is a 26 percent increase in not only pain but also disability at the six-month follow-up
- There is a 12 percent incidence of disability at the one-year follow-up

### Seek Early Treatment for Low Back Pain

Of all the people with acute low back problems, nearly 90 percent are able to tolerate normal activities within one month without medical intervention. Yet the pain should not be ignored. If low back pain does not go away in four weeks, it's advisable to seek the advice of a physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) physician. He or she can diagnose and treat low back pain to minimize the danger of further aggravation. In fact, recent studies suggest that even in cases where other

(continued on back)

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treatment options have already failed, the treatment regimens devised by a PM&R physician can cut both follow-up visits for pain management and the need for back surgery in half.

PM&R physicians are physicians of function: their role is to restore or maximize an individual's ability to function when that ability has been compromised by injury or illness.

PM&R physicians bring special strengths to the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of back pain; their multidisciplinary training in musculoskeletal problems includes in-depth understanding of both the neurologic and orthopedic components of back injuries. With this comprehensive understanding, a PM&R physician can approach back pain treatment with a non-surgical, "whole patient" approach that goes well beyond treating just a bad back.

### **Treatment Options**

When treating low back pain, a PM&R physician will first complete a comprehensive assessment of a patient's pain and functional limitations. Based on the diagnosis, an individualized treatment plan will be developed to restore the person to his or her normal activities. This rehabilitation plan occurs in three phases:

#### **Acute Phase**

In this phase, a PM&R physician treats pain and inflammation. In addition to rest, the physician may offer treatment options such as ultrasound, electrical stimulation, mobilization, medication, ice, and even specialized injections.

#### **Recovery Phase**

During this period, flexibility and strength are developed to get the body parts into their proper positions. The goal of this phase is to get the patient back to his or her usual work, sports, and leisure activities. This goal is achieved through specially designed exercises that rebuild the body.

#### **Maintenance Phase**

The main goal of the third phase of treatment is to minimize recurrence of the problem and to prevent further injury. This often consists of a total body fitness program, designed to maintain body mechanics and increase endurance after the original symptoms have resolved.

*Cited from: aaPM&R – American Academy of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation*

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