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## CHAPTER 9

# A Plethora of Back-Pain Care: Pills, Exercise, Injections, and Alternative Treatments

Every time I think that I have finally heard of all of the treatments foisted on the public for back pain, another one comes along. Recently a patient asked me about “astronaut chambers for back pain.” It seems she had read an advertisement for this and was curious about my opinion of the treatment. I had to suppress a smile and formulate a hopefully intelligible answer at the same time. I asked her to send me the advertisement so that I could try to determine the rationale for this approach. Invariably patients will show me infomercials on the back-pain cure du jour. They ask me for my opinion concerning some new treatment that I have never heard of. I am usually suspicious of these treatments, since I have not seen or heard any qualified medical evidence to support the claims of their efficacy or safety. I should have come across something about them since I am on the editorial board of four medical journals and a member of 10 professional societies, all of which

*I will tell you throughout this chapter what I think works and what to avoid in the way of treatment for your back pain.*

evaluate new treatments on a regular basis. I will discuss some of these treatments if they are widely advertised, used, of historical interest, or new on the horizon. I will also discuss the theoretical basis and any evidence that is available in the medical literature to support or debunk their use.

In this chapter I will review the nature, benefits, risks, and costs of most of the back-pain treatments that I have heard of. I am positive I will miss a few, since new treatments for back pain appear on TV on a daily basis. Even on the way to work this morning I heard a so-called “public announcement” on NPR radio for minimally invasive spine surgery. I have organized this chapter into categories of treatments such as commonly prescribed medications, physical medicine modalities, injection therapies, pain management, and alternative treatments for back pain.

Throughout this book I have given you my approach to treatment of back pain. I will tell you throughout this chapter what I think works and what to avoid in the way of treatment for your back pain. But first, let’s take a look at how the medical community evaluates the effectiveness of a particular treatment.

## **What is evidence-based medicine?**

Evidence-based medicine is the process through which the medical community determines the effectiveness and safety of a treatment, with that determination being based on four different levels of evidence.

Level I evidence is derived from the results of well-designed clinical trials. This usually means a prospective, randomized, placebo-controlled study. A systematic review, meta-analysis, of a large number of peer-reviewed publications on a treatment also qualifies as Level I evidence.

Level II evidence means that there is at least one well-designed study or that multiple low-quality clinical trials have been reviewed.

Level III data comes from case series, studies not using placebo controls, and studies that compare results to historical controls.

Level IV studies are comparisons of multiple case series from different institutions.

The evidence-based effectiveness of a medication does not guarantee its availability. For example, chymopapain (chymo), an enzyme from the papaya