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CHAPTER 1

Back Pain Is Very Common, and Here's Why

Every year I am asked to give a lecture on back pain to the senior class of the University of Miami's nationally recognized Physical Therapy School. I start out the lecture by asking the students, the majority of whom are under the age of 30, "Raise your hand if you have suffered from back pain severe enough to have warranted seeing a doctor?" Much to my amazement, each time I ask these young people, more than 50 percent of them raise their hand. This is true year in and year out. Back pain is an epidemic in modern societies, affecting more than 80 percent of people at one time or another during their life. Back pain is allegedly second only to the common cold as a reason for time lost from work. Everyone knows someone who has suffered from back pain. But what causes back pain? Why is it so common? Before answering these questions, let's look at one other interesting aspect of back pain. Even though it is so common, it is rarely serious.

My father suffered intermittent severe bouts of back pain that would render him helpless – an unusual state

Back pain is allegedly second only to the common cold as a reason for time lost from work.

for him – for a day or two at a time. I recall that he would take aspirin, rest for a few hours to allow the acute spasms to subside, then – slowly, gingerly, painfully, and crookedly – get out of bed and walk it off!

As he got older his attacks occurred less frequently and were less severe. It wasn't until years later that I would understand why he had these attacks and why they became less frequent as he aged. I would also learn how he could have prevented the frequency and severity of the attacks that he suffered from, through exercise and a healthier lifestyle.

His sister, my aunt, was not as lucky as he was. She suffered from neck pain for many years, and while I was in medical school she began to develop terrible symptoms of loss of balance and aching throughout her body. She went from doctor to doctor, but none could determine what was wrong, and a few of them labeled her neurotic.

One day while I was visiting her she described her symptoms and frustration with the medical advice she had received. I coincidentally had just rotated on the world-famous neurology service at Thomas Jefferson Medical School, where I had learned how to diagnose myelopathy, a disease of the spinal cord that causes loss of balance, stumbling, aches and pains in the arms and legs, and propensity to fall. I recognized her symptoms and arranged for her to see my neurology professor. He performed a myelogram, a test in which x-ray contrast dye is injected into the spinal canal, and confirmed that my aunt had pressure on her spinal cord from spinal stenosis (constriction of the spinal canal). She underwent surgery to relieve the pressure on her spinal cord, but her condition was too advanced and she subsequently died from complications of progressive paralysis. I was devastated by how this could have happened to her and vowed to determine how it did and what could have been done to prevent it!

As I was to discover later, my father's back pain and my aunt's spinal cord disease had been related to the same phenomenon: disc degeneration. Disc degeneration is a condition in which the normal cushioning function of the spinal disc is lost through the aging process, and it leads to spinal pain in a variety of ways. What I learned about disc degeneration, the most common cause of back pain, will help you understand what may be happening to you to cause your neck, back, arm, or leg pain.