

AUSTIN BONE AND JOINT CLINIC
PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

ORTHOPEDIC SURGERY

WITH SPECIAL INTEREST IN

TOTAL JOINT REPLACEMENT
ARTHROSCOPY AND KNEE SURGERY
HAND AND SHOULDER RECONSTRUCTION
PEDIATRIC ORTHOPEDICS
FOOT SURGERY

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BACK PAIN / SCIATICA

You have consulted me about your back pain and/or sciatica, and I would like you to have this brief discussion of the overall principles of care for you to take home and study.

Back pain is a very common problem. In a national survey, about 30% of people surveyed stated that they had had back pain in the last month! Over 50 million people have significant back pain in a year in this country, and over 5 million go to a doctor about it.

The good news is that over 70% of back pain gets better on its own, no matter how it is treated. Whenever there is such a good rate of spontaneous healing, it is very hard to be really scientific in evaluating treatment methods. Therefore, you see and hear about a lot of fad treatments, which come and go. The orthopedic surgical community has tested most fad methods, like traction, electrical stimulation, diets, vitamins, manipulation, and hanging upside down, and none of them make any truly scientific (statistical) difference in the course of back pain. Only 2-9% of people with back pain and sciatica will eventually require surgical treatment. If this is required, we will be able to offer safe and reliable surgical treatment.

At this time, however, I would like you to consider a very simple and prudent program for speeding your own recovery. There are no magic shots or medicines; patients will vary in their rate of recovery.

The principles of treatment are:

1. Rest during the severe pain phase.
2. Heat applied to muscles in spasm. (Moist heat is better.)
3. Aspirin, taken in therapeutic doses, (8-10 per day).
EXCEPTION: Allergy, gastric intolerance, ringing in the ears.
4. Controlled exercise (yes, exercise), as soon as pain permits.

If this program fails to help your problem in six weeks, we will evaluate you again, and make further decisions about your work-up and treatment. Even if your problem is a ruptured disc with pressure on the nerve root, many cases of disc herniation get better without surgery. In fact, large numbers of disc herniation cases studied over many years have proved that in four to five years, the results with and without surgery are about the same. If surgical decompression of the nerve root is necessary, it will be because of nerve pain or loss of neurological function, not back pain.

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Let's review the program, and the reasons for each part of it.

1. **Rest and heat.** The acute attack causes spasm in the muscle. (This is the body's way of trying to get you to stop moving the part.)
2. **A heating pad, or hot water helps your muscles relax.** So does a comfortable resting position on your back, or on your side. Avoid sitting. You may get up and walk around.
3. **Aspirin (except in cases of allergy).** Many medicines have been tested and compared with aspirin. None have really been proven more effective. You see much advertised on TV, but remember, the purpose of it is to make you buy a product. It is not a scientific presentation. I have spent hours researching this on your behalf, and I use buffered aspirin in my home. My preference is **Ascriptin**, but any buffered aspirin will do. The dose is 2, 4 times per day with meals or milk. If you wake up with pain - take a 5th dose. Aspirin is real medicine. It relieves pain and decreases inflammation.

If you have allergic rash, stomach upset, or ringing in your ears, stop the aspirin immediately. If you have a history of ulcer disease, or have forgotten to tell me - do so.

Muscle relaxers are of some help, but only as sedatives. They work on the brain and spinal cord, not on the muscles. I will sometimes use them to help with pain control, but I want you to know that they work by relieving stress and anxiety, not by relaxing the muscle directly.

Exercise is the thing most back pain patients fear, but it is most important. Many of us simply get really "out of shape" in our modern world, and do not even know it. There is a scientific reason why exercise helps. Aerobic exercise causes the release of beta endorphins (now you are going to learn some biochemistry), that we produce naturally in our own bodies. It is nature's way of treating our natural aches and pains. People who exercise regularly have a higher endorphin level, and it makes them feel better. You have all read about the "high" runners get, and you know that people who exercise feel better and have more energy. So, in spite of the fact that your back hurts, if you exercise properly, you will improve. I want to reassure you that any pain you have getting started will not cause permanent harm. I recommend a supervised program for all people who have not exercised for some time, or who have other risk factors.

Severe back pain can be scary when it first occurs. I have tried to provide you with some basic scientific information in this paper, distilled from a lot of study and experience on my part. The spine and surrounding muscles and nerves are complex, but the information you need is simple. The easiest thing for me to do would be to prescribe a complex treatment program that might be expensive, but I want the most effective and safest program for you. I will use my training and knowledge to worry about the other, more rare medical conditions, if needed. If you are not progressing, or feel something is wrong, call and leave a message. I will check back with you. If you have questions or concerns, write them down, and we will go over them at your next visit.