

Back pain caused by numerous factors

By Dr. Brent Wells, D.C.
Better Health Pain and Wellness Center

Dear Dr. Wells,
My family took spring break this year in Spain, where my folks live during the winter months.

During our travels, my 73-year-old dad took us to the Mediterranean coastal city of Valencia for an incredible festival.

With over 700 displays spread around the city, we walked for miles each day.

At 73, my dad is pretty spry and didn't complain of the walking. But following several days of our multiple-mile walks, he began suffering from a debilitat-

ing low back pain.

The pain would come as he moved to sit-up or down, as he reached over his head, when he bent over, and it also showed up as numbness in one leg. Having successfully used chiropractic myself for relief of low back pain, I'm wondering if he could expect similar results.

My questions are these:

With an old back like that of my Dad's, what should he expect to be able to do?

Is walking five miles too much or is it reasonable to think he should be able to do this without suffering the following days?

Can you recommend a course of action that would help him following above-average periods of exercise?

Have you seen good long-term results in low back pain treatment with older people?

What kinds of treatment do

you recommend for people over 55?

Should my dad right in just rest as a treatment or is his condition likely to be treatable?

I appreciate your opinion on this matter.

Sincerely, SG

Dear SG,

Thanks for your letter. While it is common for someone 73 years of age to have lower back pain and difficulty with walking, it is certainly not normal.

At 73, he should be able to walk without significant difficulty and he shouldn't experience pain with normal movement.

As the years go by, wear and tear on the joints of knees, hips and back naturally occurs.

However, regular exercise helps to minimize the symptoms associated with these age-related changes.

Injuries to the lower back area are the most common cause of the osteoarthritis (wearing out of the joints). Poor posture, tough and physical jobs, lack of exercise, heavy lifting, and sitting for extended periods of time can all accelerate the degenerative changes that take place in the spine.

For most adults, walking five miles is easy. However for most 73 year olds, especially if your dad has not been involved in an active exercise program or is sedentary in general, five miles could be a bit much.

Most importantly, your father should make sure that he remains as mobile as possible. The better his physical condition, the better he will be able to tolerate activities that could trigger pain.

Many seniors do not get the adequate movement or exercise that they need, and this causes the tissues of the body to shrink and tighten up, making it more prone to injury.

Start with simple shopping trips, walking at the mall, or an afternoon in the park. The more active he is without aggravating his condition, the better.

At the same time, minimize sitting, take regular stretch breaks after periods of inactivity, and add weight bearing and non-weight-bearing exercises. Examples of weight-bearing exercises would be lightweight training or walking with 3 to 5 pound dumbbells. Examples of minimally weight-bearing exercises would include swimming, walking without weights, tai chi, and some yoga exercises.

Adequate water is also important both during and after periods of exercise or exertion. Many common conditions are improved simply by adding proper intake of water to the diet.

Adults should drink .75 oz. of water per pound of body weight. For example, someone who weighs 100 pounds should drink 75 ounces, or just over four pints per day. Coffee, tea, and other caffeinated beverages do not substitute for water, as they will remove more water from the body.

If your father overdoes it, he can ice the area for 20 minutes once every hour or so to help relieve inflammation and pain.

Heat, while appropriate for older injuries, can worsen the condition as increased circulation and blood to the area and increases swelling and inflammation.

Ice is best for pain and inflam-

mation, such as with new injuries, and heat is appropriate for older injuries where increased blood flow helps with healing.

Low back pain in older people usually arises from any number of factors: bulging disks in the spine, facet joints wear, compression of nerves, bones out of alignment, ligaments, and muscle problems are common.

Many older patients have lower back pain from several of these factors. Older patients that we see in our practice have typically had lower back pain for 5, 10, 20, or even 50 years.

After someone has had lower back pain for that long, typically enough degenerative changes have taken place in the lower back area that we can offer them some improvement, and a better life.

Older patients can make significant progress, even within a short period of time, especially if they have not been active and not been receiving any treatment for their lower back.

Sometimes adding even small changes in an older person's daily routine can significantly improve the quality of their life and can reduce lower back pain.

With seniors it is important to look at their functional capacity as well as their specific pain levels.

For example, for the patient unable to sit for more than 10 minutes without significant increase in back pain, our goal at the end of one month may be the ability to sit for one to two hours.

Or as in the case of your father, where he may only be able to walk a half a mile today, walking two or three miles without significant pain may be obtainable within 60 or 90 days.

Changes like these can seem trivial to someone in their twenties and thirties, but to an older person with chronic lower back pain, these results are celebrated.

Strengthening the back is critical in improving mobility.

Mild strengthening can be achieved through activities as simple as getting up and moving around, walking, swimming, and other minimally weight-bearing to non-weight-bearing activities.

Improving mobility can also be achieved through distraction techniques, traction, chiropractic, stretching and range of motion exercises.

To make treatment results more long-lasting and reduce the chance pain will return with the same intensity, duration and frequency, the muscles supporting the spine and your mid torso must be stabilized.

This is achieved after a careful evaluation of what muscles need to be strengthened and what muscles need to be stretched. Once the specific muscles that need to be strengthened are identified, a specific program of strengthening exercises can be recommended to help strengthen the weak areas.

This will significantly reduce the possibility of relapse, and many times spur patients on to become more active in other areas of their life, like adding a visit to the health club three times a week to their routine.

Your father should be evaluated by a physician to reach an accurate diagnosis.

Chiropractic physicians are musculoskeletal specialists and

will be able to assess his condition, treat him if appropriate, or refer him onto the appropriate specialist (such as an orthopedic surgeon or neurosurgeon).

It sounds like your father may be suffering from spinal stenosis, which is a condition in which the spinal canal can become narrower leaving less room for the nerves and spinal cord traveling through it.

This can cause pain, numbness, or tingling into one or both of the legs and is especially made worse by walking.

If the spinal canal is being narrowed by one of the spinal disks pressing back into the nerves or spinal cord, this condition is more treatable, because the disks usually still have some elasticity to them and can be improved.

However if the spinal stenosis is caused by bone growth, or an excessively large disk problem,

the condition is less treatable with conservative management and surgery may be necessary, particularly if there is progressive loss of feeling in his legs and weakness, or worse, loss of bowel or bladder function.

The vast number of cases can be managed conservatively. In fact, some studies have shown that 95% to 98% of patients with lower back pain are not surgical cases. That means that only one in 20 or one in 50 patients need surgery to treat low back pain.

A program of home exercises, in-office chiropractic treatment and traction or distraction treatment, and a gym program may significantly help his condition.

For more information contact Dr. Brent Wells, Chiropractic Physician and Clinic Director of Better Health Pain and Wellness Centers with two locations in Anchorage.