

Bodies in Motion – Custom Exercise Programs Relieve Back Pain

by Koos Van Zelst, PT



Approximately 20 years ago, people experiencing back pain were commonly prescribed bed rest and immobilization of the back. Specifically with acute back problems, the patient was advised to stay in bed at least 10 days. Research within the last 20 years, however, shows that inactivity, especially prolonged inactivity, weakens the muscles supporting the spine and actually contributes to a slower healing process.

If continued too long, it can cause a prolonged recovery and, at times, conditions that worsen the problem. Exercise, on the other hand, increases muscle flexibility and strength as well as promotes healing by increasing blood flow to the injured site. Healthy muscles provide protection to bones and joints. It is important that immediately after an acute onset, the patient is put on bed rest for 24 to 48 hours. Then, the patient should receive a prescribed, guided exercise program to facilitate the spine healing process.

While back-pain sufferers should always check with their physicians concerning the appropriate treatment approach, many are referred to physical therapists. The role of the physical therapist is to provide pain relief, rehabilitation, and education. This process is often critical to a successful recovery.

On the Move

There are several important reasons to see a physical therapist regarding spinal problems. Physical therapists can teach exercise techniques and ways to use muscles that protect bone and joint structures. In fact, they can prescribe specific exercise techniques, taking the patient's pathology into consideration. Physical therapists can develop individualized programs for each patient and can also provide pain relief through different manual techniques, possible modalities, and exercises.

Within physical therapy, there are several methods for providing pain relief, including passive agents such as an ice pack, heat pack, ultrasound, electrical stimulation, and TENS (transcutaneous electrical neural stimulation). Active physical therapy employing manual techniques, specific exercises, mobilization, and self-mobilization also offers pain relief. Research shows that manual therapy techniques, mobilization, and specific pathology-directed exercises are much better for pain relief than any passive physical therapy agent.

Two common exercise methods can provide pain relief. The first is the McKenzie approach, developed by Robin McKenzie at the McKenzie Institute. The goal is to centralize the patient's pain and then progress into preventative exercises specifically designed for each spine pathology. The second method is dynamic lumbar stabilization exercises. This technique involves training muscles to automatically provide protective support during activity. These stabilization exercises are usually very successful, but it takes longer before the patient's goals are met.

A physical therapist evaluates the patient's movement, physical capabilities, body type, and activity level. For certain conditions and diagnoses, a well-trained physical therapist will design a customized exercise program based on research of the most effective spine exercises for pain relief.

The research aspect has become quite important over the last five to six years and enables the therapist to prescribe the appropriate exercise program, movements, and position, as well as establish long-term goals based on proven research. For example, new literature (2004) on posterior pelvic tilt activities in standing for patients with stenosis showed that these patients responded to posterior pelvic tilt activities in standing throughout their waking hours as long as they performed them more than 50 times per day.



Get with the Program

Specific exercises and the amount of practice under the supervision of the physical therapist will vary depending on the condition, the pathology, and the individual's needs. Reviewing the patient's response to exercise and compliance with the program and adjusting the exercise program according to response are of utmost importance to establish a positive, long-term outcome.

Physical therapists strive to continually improve exercise techniques, learning new ones as they become available and scrutinizing fads. A well-trained therapist will always examine the patient's postural and movement habits, suggesting improvements for the specific patient that will provide adequate protection for the spine and prevent further pathology or increased pain.