

## **Back pain and the young person**

We all know someone with back pain – indeed, considering 60-80% of adults get it at some stage in their lives, you probably have had back pain yourself. Most of us manage to get over it – we see our GP, our local Chartered Physiotherapist, have some treatment and it usually goes away. We're adults – we can cope with this. But it's different when your school going child or teenager comes home complaining of back or spinal pain. This is something to worry about – or is it?

Recent studies show that up to 50% of 15 year olds report having had back pain. But what causes adolescent back pain? Firstly, to reassure - most of the time the causes of adolescent back pain are the causes of adult back pain; mild strains of the muscles, ligaments and joints of the spine. These are due to hard knocks and falls during play and sport, poor posture for long periods such as when slouched on the couch, or simply low levels of activity. The last reason is becoming more of a concern as childhood obesity and inactivity increases. The bones and muscles get their nutrition by movement. For a young person this means much more activity than for an adult. And for some young people this simply does not happen.

As a Chartered Physiotherapist, the above are the most common sources of back pain that I see in young people. After coming to a diagnosis the most appropriate treatment, be it exercises, spinal mobilisation, postural advice etc, is given and that is usually the end of the problem. The second most common source of pain is what can be called 'growing pains' The patient reports a vague and widespread area of pain which may be hard to pin down in terms of what makes it better or worse. Examination reveals nothing much, except for some areas of muscle tightness and mild weakness. Very often the patient is going through or is just at the start of a major growth spurt. When this happens the bones in the spine and the rest of the body are growing aggressively and this can cause a mild inflammation in the growing part of the bone, which can be the cause of the pain. Muscles are slow to keep up with rate of growth and become temporarily tight and weak. At this vulnerable time sport can make things worse if done to excess. The treatment revolves around stretching and carefully strengthening the tight and weak structures as well as rest from the more aggressive activities for a short time. This usually settles down very well and causes no long term problems.

Finally, there are a few rare conditions which cause back pain and are more serious. These are very few and far between. Chances are your young person with back pain will not have one of these. But if in doubt, check with your GP or local Chartered Physiotherapist – you're definitely in the best hands !

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