

Mind your back!

80% of people will suffer from back pain at some stage in their lives. This is a truly amazing statistic, especially when you consider that most of us would be totally unaware of how much at risk we are. Not only is back pain distressing and inconvenient, it is also very expensive, both for the sufferer and for the health services and employer as well. For example, in industrial compensation claims, back pain can be responsible for a third of the total claims. And the casualties are rising. World-wide, sickdays due to back pain continued to soar through the nineties and show no signs of slowing down. It makes sense, then, to try and put a face on this shadowy problem so that we can tackle it effectively.

So how do you know if you're one of the 80%? How do you know if you should be worried about your little ache or niggle? Well the simple answer is that if you are aware of discomfort at all, you have a problem. Quite often, a feeling of discomfort can be a warning that a more severe pain is about to develop. It is possible to prevent this from happening, so it is vital to seek help immediately at this stage. You should immediately contact your local Chartered Physiotherapist (see Golden Pages) for advice and treatment (you don't need a GP referral). You will receive a full examination, initial treatment for pain relief and be advised on damage limitation for the early stages. As treatment progresses, you will be taught how to safely return to normal activities, taught strength and stretch exercises for return to full function, and receive whatever treatment is necessary. This can include mobilisation, manipulation, massage, muscle techniques, pain relief machines of various types and taping or braces as needed.. You will also be shown how to prevent the pain coming back and how to treat yourself at home, if it does. In my own clinic, I find that 4 to 6 sessions is the average number of treatments needed for return to normal activity.

Of course, back pain can be much more severe than just a little niggle. Many people suffer a feeling of the back 'going out' and feel severe pain, often in the legs as well as the back. This can be linked to a heavy lift or strain, or something as light as reaching out for a cup of tea. Again, immediately seek advice from you local Chartered Physiotherapist. If necessary, your therapist will contact your GP for advice if he/she feels that an X ray or medication is needed. One word of advice - make sure your 'physio' is Chartered. This means that he/she has a **genuine** medical qualification, a minimum of 4 years university education, is recognised by VHI and BUPA and (very importantly these days) is legally responsible for his/her actions and is therefore professionally insured. The 'medical therapist' field is completely unregulated in Ireland, therefore, anyone can call themselves a 'physio', sometimes with no more than a weekend course in massage to their names. So make sure that the person you trust your health and well being with is a Chartered Physiotherapist.

What causes all this pain then? Well, one of the more common causes is disc damage. The disc is a circle of jelly like material that sits between the bones and helps absorb shock. When a disc 'slips' what actually happens is that it tears, and the jelly bulges out. If it hits a nerve, then the pain can be quite severe and can go down the leg. In our modern society, we sit a lot, and we also bend and lift a lot. This is very stressful for the discs over the years, and they can become fragile. Add a heavy digging session in the garden or a lift that goes wrong, and you can end up with a torn disc and pain. But take heart, it is possible to protect your discs as you go about your

daily business. If you have to bend, squat and bend your knees rather than your back. Try to avoid spending long periods of time sitting, but if you have to, sit in a straight, firm chair and put a rolled up towel in the small of your back for support. Learn how to lift heavy loads safely, either at work from a trained instructor or from your local Chartered Physiotherapist. These are all little things, but if you can make them into habits, you can save your back a lot of unnecessary stress and strain.

If you would like more information or advice, or if you have a specific problem you would like treatment for, contact your local Chartered Physiotherapist (see Golden Pages). Or alternatively, call the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists at 01 4022148 or your own GP.

**Emilie McGrath B Physio, MSc Sports Med, MISC
Chartered Physiotherapist**

© Emilie McGrath 2009