

Mythbusters 101: Low back pain

This is the first installment of a monthly blog we here at UR Medicine/ Noyes Health Physical and Sports Therapy will be providing in order to educate the public about common problems and beliefs we see in the clinic every day. This specific post focuses on some common myths I hear every day in the clinic about low back pain. Many of these myths were believed to be true decades ago. However, research has proven these to be misleading or false.

1.) **Rest and NSAIDS are the best treatment for acute low back pain**

Research has shown that this common recommendation is actually one of the worst things you can do with a recent back injury as it promotes longer recovery times and time off work. Movement has proven to be the best treatment for acute episodes of low back pain. For some, walking is a great thing to do when your back is bothering you and will decrease your time off work and duration of pain. When it comes to movement for your back, “no pain, no gain” is not the strategy. Your back will often prefer movement in one specific direction. A physical therapist is an expert at identifying these pain-triggering movements and prescribing exercises that will decrease your pain, improve your mobility, and get you back to your activity of choice.

2.) My SI joint is “out of alignment” or my hips are “out of place”

Many times healthcare providers will tell patients with low back pain that their SI joint is out of alignment or hips are out of place. This is an old and outdated approach to back pain as recent research has shown that it takes a tremendous amount of force (i.e. car accident, fall down the stairs) to shift your pelvis out of alignment. Your SI or sacroiliac joint has been shown to only move 1 to 2 millimeters with daily activity which is not enough to cause the joint to get out of place. If you have back pain and it did not result from some sort of trauma of (i.e. car accident, fall), it is unlikely your SI joint is the cause of your pain. Consult a physical therapist to find out the cause of your pain as well as how to treat it using exercises and stretches you can perform at home. By identifying the root cause or dysfunction, a physical therapist can help prevent reoccurrence of this pain.

3.) “My pain is so severe I think I need back surgery and nothing else will help”

Your body has a great capacity to heal when given time and proper treatment. It can appear there is no end in sight. However, research has shown consistently that treatment such as physical therapy, massage therapy, and chiropractic are more or equally beneficial as surgery for back conditions. If you are someone experiencing low back pain without pain or numbness in your legs, research demonstrates you would benefit from physical therapy more than surgery. Patients who have these symptoms and receive back surgery end up with longer healing rates, greater time off work, and may require multiple back surgeries in the future. Before choosing surgery, consult a physical therapist and discuss the pain you have been having. Often, a few sessions of physical therapy can save someone from undergoing an invasive and expensive surgical procedure.

4.) “My MRI showed I have a bulging or herniated disc. Physical Therapy cannot change that.”

Medical imaging has skyrocketed in recent years and more patients are receiving XRAY's and MRI's due to complaint of low back pain. In the past, healthcare providers based treatment off of findings that were shown on an MRI or XRAY. Today however, research has shown people without back pain are diagnosed with bulging or herniated disc as well as degenerative arthritis on MRI. You may ask how could that be???. Current Research has shown that findings on an MRI are often just a part of our regular aging process and not a direct cause for someone with low back pain. People above the age of 60 have a 50-60% chance of having a bulging disc show up on MRI. That number goes up to 80% if you are in your 70's to 80's. This tells us that an MRI does not show the whole story. Objective findings, such as muscle testing and motion restrictions, must be done by a healthcare provider to corroborate the findings on the MRI. At UR Medicine Noyes Health Physical and Sports Therapy, we pride ourselves on providing a professional skilled assessment of each patient we see. This ensures proper identification of the root cause for your pain based off of all the information at our disposal including but not limited to medical imaging.

I hope you found this article to be helpful and informative. Our therapists empower YOU as the patient to take control of your condition and give you tools to abolish pain and prevent future flare-ups. We would love to talk more about these things with you especially if you are living with low back pain. If you have never seen a physical therapist for your back pain, give us a try. You will be happy you did.

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