

## Learning how to live with it can kill you

For decades doctors have attempted to link general health and wellness to the back and spinal cord. 2 recent land mark studies have established the link. Recurring neck and back pain, 2 of the most common medical conditions in our society, can have serious consequences that go beyond the discomfort of the condition itself. Spinal pain of long duration is recognized as an “unsilent” killer with grave consequences for overall health, wellness, morbidity, and mortality.

According to recent research conducted in the United Kingdom at the University of Leeds, stiffness in the neck and bad posture can have a major impact on blood pressure and pulse rate. According to the study, stimulating the neck muscles also caused stimulation of the brain area that regulates autonomic nervous function. This means that there is a previously unknown neural connection between these muscles and the brainstem. According to neuroscientists, these findings explain why blood pressure and heart rate sometimes change after whiplash injuries. This also helps to explain why hours hunched over a computer can have a similar effect. The study concluded that the pathway exists for neck pain and bad posture to significantly affect overall health.

A second study just released in the journal Spine in August suggests that back pain can have serious consequences on the health of your heart. According to the study, people with daily back pain have an 85% greater risk of coronary heart disease than those with infrequent pain. In addition, these individuals have higher levels of morbidity and mortality, as well as decreased quality of life. These factors persisted even after adjustments for other cardiovascular risk factors.

The common denominator of both of these studies is that chronic pain in the neck or low back can have grave consequences on your cardiovascular system. The old idea that you can ignore chronic spinal pain as a natural part of the aging process can have deadly consequences. Many of my patients have been incorrectly told that “nothing can be done” for an aching back because of arthritis, work demands or old lifestyle choices. This is very rarely the case. Controlling neck and back pain can sometimes be difficult, but it is rarely impossible. Conversely, this new research obligates physicians to actively treat spinal pain conditions with the same thoroughness as high cholesterol or diabetes. Ignoring or down playing chronic spinal pain can have similarly dire consequences.

Understanding that neck and back pain can have consequences on you general health is only the beginning. What can be done? Again we can utilize science to help address the issue. Recent research has shown solid evidence for 4 effective treatment methods for neck and back pain. Each treatment has its pro’s and con’s. In our next issue, we will explore these options and come to a conclusion as to what may be the best option for a particular individual.