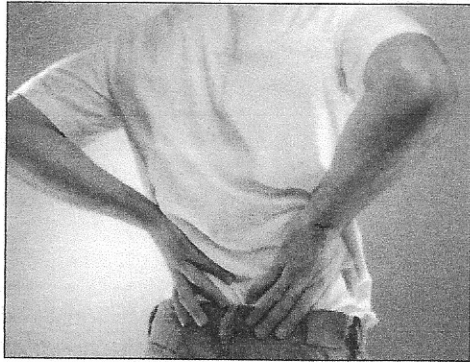


The Hidden Consequences of Chronic Back Pain

By Dr. Tyson Swigart

Chiropractors, osteopathic physicians and other practitioners of manual spinal therapies have attempted for over a century to prove a link between back pain and general health and wellness. Two recent landmark studies have gone a long way to establish this link. Recurring neck and back pain, two of the most common medical conditions in our society, can have serious consequences that go beyond the discomfort of the pain. Spinal pain of long duration is becoming recognized as a potential contributor to decreased vitality and overall health. Left untreated, it can contribute significantly to increased morbidity and mortality.

An August study released in the journal *Spine* 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 88% greater risk of coronary heart disease than those with infrequent or no pain. This correlated with higher levels of mortality as well as an overall decreased quality of life. The risk factors persisted even after adjust-



ments for other cardiovascular risk factors such as family history, obesity and smoking.

An additional study recently published in the United Kingdom suggests that bad posture and neck stiffness can contribute significantly to high blood pressure and increased heart rate. According to the study, stimulation of the neck muscles also caused stimulation of the brain area that regulates autonomic nervous system function. This finding suggests that there is a previously unknown connection between the brainstem and the muscles and the muscles deep within the neck. According to the neuroscientists involved in the study, these findings may help to explain why blood pres-

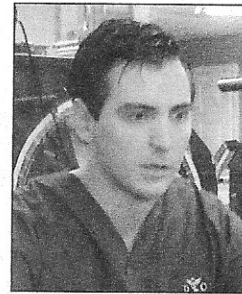
sure and heart rate often change after "whiplash" injuries or other neck trauma. In addition, it may shed light on why desk workers who spend hours sitting may have similar findings. This groundbreaking research opens the door for exploring the link between neck pain and cardiovascular health.

Establishing that neck and back pain can have consequences on your longevity and well being is only the beginning. It is becoming apparent that ignoring back pain as a natural part of the aging process, or as a consequence of a job related activity, is no longer an option.

Most chronic spinal pain begins gradually and is often best treated in its early stages. Getting a good early diagnosis may help prevent neck and back pain from becoming chronic. Once it is established; chronic pain is often more difficult to treat, and also generally requires more time to control. Again, getting a good diagnosis of

course and exacerbating factors is important. The strongest research support for treating chronic neck and back pain suggests a combination of exercise rehabilitation and spinal manipulation to achieve the longest and best relief. Massage therapy and acupuncture also show promise. Anti-inflammatory and pain medication help to reduce pain, but may have other side effects that can be harmful to your overall health.

This recent evidence suggests that chronic neck and back pain need to be treated with the same thoroughness as high blood pressure and cholesterol are today. Controlling these conditions may be difficult, but is rarely impossible. The benefits may be far greater than we had previously thought.



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