

# Information on the Chiropractic Care of Lower Back Pain

Etter Chiropractic of Olathe, KS

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## Chiropractic Care of Lower Back Pain

Lower back pain is probably the most common condition seen the the Chiropractic office. Each month it is estimated that up to one third of persons experience some type of lower back pain. About 80% of adults will experience lower back pain at some point. Most episodes of lower back pain are relatively brief and last less than two weeks. Younger people with lower back pain also seem more inclined to have back pain as adults. It has been estimated that up to 90% of persons with lower back pain will be able to recover in 30 days or less.



One of the big issues in dealing with lower back pain is the difficulty in determining the specific cause of the pain. Many parts of the lower back are possible causes for lower back pain. Even with advanced imaging such as MRI and CT scans the causes of back pain can be elusive. The good news is that very few back pain sufferers have problems that effect the nerves and causes neurologic symptoms such as sciatica.

The intervertebral disc or more simply the disc is a commonly known cause of back pain. It has been estimated that about 40% of back pain sufferers have back pain that is related to the disc. Other joints that often contribute to lower back pain are the sacro-iliac joints and the facet joints. Other much less common but also possible causes of back pain include cancer and spinal infection which are rare.

The effectiveness of chiropractic in treating back pain has also been established by research studies including a UCLA study that found chiropractic to have a higher level of patient satisfaction compared to medical care for lower back pain. The UCLA study favored Chiropractic due to the fact Chiropractors were found to communicate more with patients concerning their back pain and give more helpful advice. Government studies have also indicated that Chiropractic was effective in the long term treatment of lower back pain.

## The Lumbar Disc

The lumbar intervertebral disc is composed of two parts. The outer part is a tough ligament called the annulus fibrosus (or annulus/AF). The inner part is a more liquid shock absorbing core called the nucleus. The disc is often cited as one of the prime causes of lower back pain. The disc itself may be the cause of back pain without ever pinching the sciatic nerve roots. The outer part of the disc has

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nerves and can cause pain when the fibers tear or become irritated. A disc herniation occurs when the nucleus squirts through the outer annulus. When the nucleus is herniated it may directly compress the sciatic nerve roots or set up a more long lasting inflammatory situation that results in lower level irritation to the sciatic nerve. Most disc herniations become smaller over time and the nuclear material shrinks and turns to a more scar tissue like substance. Once a disc is herniated though it never really becomes normal again and the nucleus cannot ever go back into the center of the disc. Back pain symptoms may mostly resolve even when a herniation is present and is still comparable in size to the time it was causing severe problems. It has been estimated that up to a third of all people have some type of disc herniation issue. Many disc herniations are nearly asymptomatic and may only produce mild temporary pain. Other disc herniations can be nearly totally disabling.



There are several motions which are able to contribute to a herniation type injury of the back. One is sudden loading of the back when bent at the waist such as when lifting something off the floor. Another motion associated with back injury is twisting while bent at the waist. Often the patient with a disc problem will report a twisting injury with immediate pain in the legs.

Persons with disc problems often have a history of multiple bouts of lower back pain that resolve and usually without causing any pain that goes into the legs.

Usually disc herniations are more common in persons under 50 due to the fact that the nucleus dries out with age and there is simply less to be herniated. Younger persons with back pain often report more pain while sitting and less pain while walking or standing. Older patients often have more difficulty with walking or standing in the case of a disc problem.

MRI is often recommended for persons with episodes of back pain that last longer than 30 days. Chiropractic and exercise is the treatment of choice up to 30 days but if the pain cannot be reduced in the first 30 days of care an MRI is a good idea. MRI is rarely used initially in cases of lower back pain unless the pain is very severe and neurologic problems are present such as numbness or muscle weakness.

Chiropractic management of lower back pain due to disc problems involves hand mobilization of the lower back in both a side lying and prone position. The technique of lumbar flexion distraction is a special traction technique that is often helpful. The patient lies on the special table while the lower part of the table bends towards the floor. The goal of the technique is to remove the pressure to the discs and facet joints.

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Walking is often effective in reducing pain in the case of disc herniation. The pelvic tilt exercise is often effective as well.

## The Facet Joints

The facet joints are joints in the back of the spine that limit twisting and extension of the back. The facet joints are a common cause of back pain. Facet joint problems often result in sharp localized back pain with some pain in the leg or buttocks above the knee. The pain often starts suddenly after an awkward movement or bending at the waist. Facet joint pain is often very similar to pain that is related to the disc and it is difficult to determine if the pain is disc or facet related. A person may also have both a disc problem and an injury to the facet joints at the same time. Often the lining of the joint becomes trapped in the center of the joint causing acute pain. Chiropractic treatments of the back are often able to release the trapped joint lining and give dramatic pain relief in these cases.

## Canal Stenosis

Stenosis is a condition often seen in persons over 50 years old. Common complaints include back and leg pain. The pain can be in one leg or both and may often be hard to localize. The pain of stenosis may become worse with walking (claudicating). The pain may be relieved by resting in a sitting position for 15 minutes or more.

Stenosis may be caused by scar tissue from old disc herniations. Other causes are thickening of bones in arthritic type conditions. For leg pain to occur several levels of stenosis must be present. Chiropractic care may often be effective for stenosis but the results are less predictable due to the presence of scar tissue.



## The Sacro-iliac Joints

The sacro-iliac joints or SI joints are the joints that transmit the weight of the spine into the pelvis. There are two joints that are found at or below the level of the waist and are about 4 inches long. The SI joints are common causes of lower back pain. Often a person reports acute pain over one side of the SI joint after straightening up from a stooped position. The pain may radiate down the back of the leg but usually not past the knee. The pain is often sharp and stabbing and may be relieved somewhat by sitting or lying down. It has been estimated that SI problems account for up to half of all lower back pain cases seen by Chiropractors. The motions of the SI joint are small and occur mainly in the standing position. Usually the motion is described as 3-5 degrees or about 5mm

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of movement.

Chiropractic treatment is often highly effective in persons with SI problems and dramatic pain relief may often result. Ice over the painful SI joint is often helpful as well. Walking on level ground may also be helpful.

### The Piriformis

The piriformis is a small muscle in the side of the buttocks that turns the leg outward. Problems with the piriformis can cause impingement of the sciatic nerve. Usually this type of back pain is felt in the back of the leg and buttocks and is not usually associated with any type of injury or known cause. In some people the sciatic nerve runs through the piriformis muscle making them especially susceptible to sciatic caused by tightness of the piriformis muscle. Chiropractic treatment of piriformis problems involves myofascial release to the piriformis muscle as well as a stretching program.



### Types of Diagnostic Imaging for Lower Back Pain

CT (Computerized Tomography) is used most for cases of suspected fracture or stenosis. It can also be helpful in cases of suspected tumors or infection of the spine as well as disc herniation. CT involves more radiation exposure than MRI.

MRI has the advantage of less radiation but is higher in cost than CT. MRI is very good at looking at soft tissue and especially valuable to look at the disc. MRI is usually used only after about 30 days of conservative care (including Chiropractic care) that has not completely resolved a case of back pain or sciatica. Patients who need an MRI can usually get an appointment within several days. The images are read by a radiologist and a report is available within days. Chiropractors can refer patients for MRI directly without MD referral.

X Rays are used primarily in persons who have had some type of traumatic injury. They have very limited value in the case of disc herniation. They can show the thinning of the disc space and the presence of long standing disc thinning as well as arthritic changes to the spine. Many people with perfectly normal looking spines on X ray have severe back pain. Many people with very degenerated spines have very little problems as well. Arthritic problems seen on X rays seldom correspond with the type of lower back pain experienced.

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## Chiropractic Treatment for Lower Back Pain

A case history is always the first step in treatment of back pain. Usually the history and type of pain can give a good idea of the problem. The nature and distribution of the pain is often very telling as well. Even the way a person points at the painful area is helpful. Often the way a person walks is telling as well. Certain ways of walking are known as antalgic gaits or positions.

Chiropractic exams for lower back pain involve orthopedic testing. Orthopedic tests are motions and positions designed to stress certain parts of the body to determine if those parts are the cause of pain. The straight leg raising test is one such test used to determine if a disc problem is present. A range of motion is also helpful for determining the cause of back pain. Palpation or touching the back while certain movements are performed can pinpoint the problem joints and is very valuable in locating the cause of problems.



Chiropractic Treatments of the lower back are designed to normalize the function of inflamed or immobile joints. Most Chiropractic adjustments involve a gentle pushing type motion that is designed to slightly move the joints. Most often during an adjustment a person will lie on either their stomach, side or back. While lying on the stomach the technique of flexion distraction is often used. Flexion distraction is a gentle motion in which the table moves in a certain way that tractions the joints of the lower back. It is often helpful in cases of disc irritation or facet joint pain.

Adjustments in the side lying position are known as side posture adjustments. The side posture adjustment is helpful in facet joint pain, disc pain and sacro-iliac problems. Drop table or Thompson adjustments are also used for back pain. A special table with pneumatic motion is often called a drop table. Certain parts of the drop table can raise and lower under hand pressure. During the Chiropractic adjustment parts of the table are raised and then lower as a hand pressure on the back is used. Myofascial techniques that address the muscular component of back pain are very helpful as well. Myofascial release is often very helpful in cases of piriformis syndrome or in cases in which the hamstrings have irritated the lower back or pelvis. Chiropractic treatments are usually most effective when the combination of joint mobilization and myofascial release techniques are combined.

Home care for lower back pain involves gentle exercises that are non jarring. Walking is one of the best. The pelvic tilt or cat back is a great exercise as well. Ice is generally preferred over heat in the first several weeks of care of back pain due to the fact ice can reduce inflammation.

For cases of back pain it is generally recommended that a person have between five to eight Chiropractic treatments over 2-3 weeks. Some people experience significant relief after only a few visits while others may take much longer.