



OA of the Spine

by ALI ESFAHANI

Managing Osteoarthritis of the Spine

Osteoarthritis of the spine is a breakdown of the cartilage of the joints and discs in the neck and lower back. Sometimes osteoarthritis produces bone spurs that put pressure on the nerves leaving the spinal column. This can cause weakness and pain in the arms, legs, or groin.

What Causes Osteoarthritis of the Spine?

Spinal arthritis is one of the common causes of back pain; it is the mechanical breakdown of the cartilage between the joints in the back portion of the spine that can lead to mechanically created pain. Over time, bone spurs typically form on the facet joints, vertebrae, and even around the spine. These bone spurs are created as a response to joint instability but in turn can cause more pain in the long-run.

The rubbing of bones on each other is thought to lead to irritation and inflammation of the surrounding structures of the spine, and the pain felt by arthritis sufferers.

The likelihood of developing arthritis in the spine increases as a person gets over the age of 40. For younger people, usually trauma to the joint or a genetic defect can lead to the development of arthritis. It also occurs more frequently in people who are overweight or do repeated activities that put stress on the back.

Arthritis of the spine can cause a multitude of symptoms. Primarily causes stiffness and pain that is relieved when the person lays down. The symptoms of arthritis usually get worse as the day progresses, culminating at night, however the stiffness and pain tend to be worse in the morning as well. It often improves during the day as the person carries on his or her daily activities.

A lot of time staying in one position can aggravate the pain and stiffness, while moving and changing positions can relieve the discomfort felt from arthritis. Sometimes swelling and warmth in one or more joints occurs, particularly during weather changes or localized tenderness when the joint or affected area of the spine is pressed. There can also be steady or intermittent pain in a joint, often described as an ache. The pain may of arthritis is usually aggravated by motion.

Unfortunately there is no proven cure to arthritis so currently the options out there are more symptom and pain relief including physical therapy, diet, medication, alternative therapies, and surgery.

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Physical Therapy/Diet

The goal of the physical therapy is to increase the flexibility and strength of the supporting structures in the spine

to help bring support to the arthritic joints. The idea is by increasing the strength of the muscles surrounding the arthritic joint, the extra support will take the load off the joint, reducing pain. Aerobic exercises can also help to bring circulation to the joints and also build muscle strength.

The proper nutrition program and supplements can help immensely with the pain associated with arthritis. A single herb or food might not cure someone of their pain, but the proper diet can definitely help.

There are foods out there that are known to help suppress inflammatory diseases and ease the pain that many people suffer from. The foods that help with chronic pain are thought to do so by providing anti-oxidants and suppressing inflammation, factors thought to perpetuate the pain cycle.

Some of these wonder-foods include:

- Fish
- Lettuce
- Spinach
- Nuts
- Low-fat dairy
- Tomatoes
- Turmeric, and many more.

Supplementation of vitamin K, D, and magnesium, and glucosamine chondroitin may also help in reducing pain and increasing joint stability. On the other hand, there are foods that promote inflammation, such as refined sugar and fried foods.

Medication

There are a variety of medications out there that have their own associated risks and side effects. For moderate pain, the NSAIDs and Tylenol are often used. NSAIDs are known for providing more relief because they reduce inflammation, which is thought to bring on the symptoms of pain.

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Medication

Typically for all-day relief, a long-lasting NSAID like Naproxen or Celecoxib is required as opposed to an NSAID like Ibuprofen that will last only about 4-6 hours.

For more severe pain, narcotics and opioids are used. Although they are more effective than other pain medications, narcotics are considered controversial because of their potential for addiction and side effects.

Whatever medication your doctor decides is best for you, it is best to keep open communication about any side effects or concerns you may have about them. One must also be certain to follow the recommended dosage of medication strictly, as to avoid any harmful side effects the medication may cause.

Alternative Therapies

There are many alternative therapies that some people find helpful to alleviate the arthritis in their spine. These include:

- Heat and cold therapy
- Chiropractic manipulation
- Biofeedback
- TENS Unit

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- Massage
 - Meditation

Heat and cold therapy are great because they are cheap and readily available to be used. TENS units, which relieves pain by electrically suppressing pain signals, have also been reported as being fairly effective.

The great thing about alternative therapies is that they don't have the associated side effects that most medications have.

Surgery

Most cases of arthritis can be helped without surgery. However, depending on the type of arthritis in the spine and if all other modalities fail, surgery can be an option.

For facet-joint arthritis, there is a non-invasive procedure available called a radiofrequency ablation, that's goal is to simply turn-off the nerve emitting the pain signals from the arthritic joint. Fusions and laminectomies are also surgeries that are offered in extreme cases.

However, back surgery is known for not being a sure-fire solution and can change the normal biomechanics of the spine. New surgeries are being developed, such as facet-joint replacements, offering promise to an area of medicine that could use improvement.

Arthritis of the spine can be debilitating, but some of these treatments can help to alleviate the pain and make living with the condition manageable.