

Oh My Aching Back

Corridor Doctors prevent and
relieve the pain

BY ALY PAYNE

T

here are weeks,
days, or even
months when time
is seemingly not on
our side. Amidst the
chaos, we focus solely
on the tasks ahead,
eyeing our To-Do list
and hastily passing the

hours without listening to our body. Then,
almost overnight, a creeping discomfort
appears in our neck and back area, and
we feel a strain even during our favorite
activities.

While neck and back pain happens
to the best of us, we've spoken to some



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— Dr. Jeremy Denning,
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White's Plano

of our local physicians in order to target the various causes, as well as the diverse ways we can prevent or relieve symptoms from the comfort of our home. You may be surprised to learn a few highlights of summer are among the contributing factors.

We know that busy schedules are part of life — it just comes with the territory — but if you're among those who spend a majority of your day bent over a computer screen or desk, you're at greater risk for neck and back pain. Luckily, summer is around the corner, so relaxation and an oceanside novel are in the near future.

If only it was that easy. If only weeks of vacation were sufficient for curing the continued accumulation of pressure on the spine. Even more upsetting is the daunting reality that some of

those so-called “leisure” activities are working against our physical health. They're actually making it worse.

Let's start with a beloved summer cliché: lounging beneath the sun's warm rays with only a bestselling novel between you and the sea.

This seems harmless; in fact, it almost seems beneficial when you consider the fact that you're literally lounging. But according to Dr. Frank Batlle, a neurosurgeon affiliated with Dallas Medical Center, it often places the neck in a less than optimal position. So, as you become swept up in pages of awe-inspiring rhetoric, your spine is no longer lengthened, increasing strain and tension.

Fortunately, summer frees up time for movement. As you embark on this year's highly anticipated family vacation, you can't help but think of daily tennis matches, hours of afternoon golf followed by cocktails at the club, and evening runs through your destination's world-renowned nature preserves. For most, this ambition and determination is worthy of praise — and we're certainly not disputing that fact — but knowing when you're overexerting yourself is key.

“The activities that contribute to spine pain,” says John McGowan, medical director at Medical City Dallas's Brain and Spine Program, “are the ones that ask the spine to do one or more of the following: spend prolonged periods of time bending over or working on objects above your head, and any activity that places the same stress on the spine repeatedly over a relatively short period of time.” The aforementioned perks of vacation fit neatly into McGowan's latter description, but his initial description is common in popular staycation hobbies.

Who doesn't love a day out in the garden or even just a Saturday tidying

up the landscape? Here's a hint — it's not just your teenagers who find a full day of yardwork distasteful. Your neck and back are on the same page. So while you may find joy in engaging in these summer traditions, it's vital that you recognize your body's limits and listen carefully to what else a little ache might be indicating.

We know what you're thinking; this all seems a bit contradictory. You can't move around, but you can't sit still? The answer is no, so take a deep breath, because it's all about moderation and knowing what you can and cannot handle. In fact, a few simple stretches can assist in neck and back pain prevention. Think about yoga and pilates; both offer a gentle, yet substantial, workout while helping you improve spinal conditions through elongation and strength work.

Physician at Texas Health Spine and Orthopedic Center, Dr. Scott Kutz (neurosurgeon specializing in spine), specifically details a few examples of beneficial neck and back stretches and strengthening exercises. They seem quite simple but are profoundly accommodating to the area of focus.

Neck Stretching

Neck Rotation: Rotate neck to the right and left.

Face Clock: Trace the outer edge of an imaginary clock both clockwise and counterclockwise with your head.

Neck Flexion: Push your head forward and down, keeping chin tucked for ten seconds.

Side Bend: Side bending to the left and right.

Strengthening

Head Lift: Lie on your back, knees bent, feet flat on the floor. Tuck the chin and lift head toward chest with shoulders on the floor, holding for ten seconds. Next, turn on the right side, place palm on left shoulder and lift head toward the left shoulder. Switch and repeat on the left side. Lastly, get on hands and knees, slowly drop head toward the chest and hold ten seconds.

Bridge: Lie on your back, knees bent, feet flat on the floor. Contract your abdominal and buttocks muscles as you slowly lift your buttocks three to five inches off the floor. Hold for at least five seconds. Do this ten times.

Leg Reach: Get on your hands and knees, keeping your knees directly under your hips and your hands directly under your shoulders. Keeping your hips level and abdominal muscles tight, extend one leg straight out behind you until it's parallel with the floor. Hold for at least five seconds. Do this ten times and then switch legs.



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— *Dr. Scott Kutz, M.D. Texas Health Spine and Orthopedic Center*

Back Exercises

Hamstring Stretch: Lie on your back with your buttocks close to the door jamb. Extend your legs along the floor, bending them slightly. Raise one leg and rest your heel against the door jamb. Straighten your raise by flattening it toward the door jamb. Feel the stretch in the back of your thigh. Hold for 30 seconds. Do this three times and then switch legs.

Quad Stretch: Position yourself at arm’s length from the wall. Keep your eyes facing straight ahead. Place one hand against the wall. With your other hand, grasp your ankle. Pull your lower leg straight back. When you feel the stretch in the front of your thigh, hold for 30 seconds without bouncing. Do this three times and then switch legs.

Prone Press: Lie on your stomach with feet slightly apart and your elbows bent. Look at the floor, relax your stomach and back muscles, and push up on your forearms, slowly arching your back. Continue until your belly button is about to rise off the floor. Hold for five seconds and then lie back down. Do this ten times.

It’s certainly important to incorporate stretches into your daily activities, especially if you consider yourself to be fairly athletic, but strengthening your core muscles can greatly increase your odds at avoiding future pain as well. As you build up your abdominal strength,

you’ll find that your posture improves, often resulting in better technique — be it swinging a golf club or lifting bags of topsoil in the yard — allowing for minimization of discomfort. But in addition to these two components, diet and nutrition are equally significant in maintaining spine health.

“A well-balanced diet can provide the necessary vitamins and nutrients for your body to repair damaged muscles and ligaments,” says Dr. Jason Taub with Dallas Neurosurgical and Spine.

There are, however, circumstances where back pain simply will not subside, and we’ve asked our North Dallas medical professionals for signs and “Signs and symptoms of significant neck and back injury that should prompt one to seek medical attention include severe or unrelenting pain, numbness or tingling in the arms or legs, weakness of the arms or legs, or changes in bowel or bladder function, especially bowel or bladder incontinence,” Dr. Scott Kutz, M.D. from Texas Health Spine and Orthopedic Center said.

Treatments are available in the area and we’ve listed them below.

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Outpatient physical and/or occupational therapy, pain management procedures, surgical intervention

At Dallas Medical Center, customized treatment plans, based on thorough patient examination, are offered in order to cater to each specific individual.

Affiliate Dr. Battle maintains the WellSpine Clinic.

Baylor Scott & White Medical Center is full spectrum: from conservative treatment modalities such as physical therapy and pain management to full gamut of surgical treatment options performed in a minimally invasive fashion is available at Medical City Dallas: Brain & Spine Program, as well as



performance of a variety of injections by on-staff pain management physicians, neurosurgeons and orthopedic surgeons available to perform multiple spine surgeries (minimally invasive and complete deformity correction available)

With patient care in mind, Texas Health Spine and Orthopedic Center helps pair patients with the doctor most appropriate for their care based on specific needs. Takes into consideration the physician’s specialty, insurance accepted, location preference and specific patient requests.

Assists patients as they navigate through their treatment cycle.

Dallas Neurosurgical and Spine provides treatment for all spine disorders: degenerative, oncologic and infectious.

With the use of the latest minimally invasive techniques which minimizes operative times, recovery, and disruption of muscles and ligaments.

Specialize in nonsurgical options such as therapy, exercise, directed injection and medical management.

“Most of the cases of neck or low back pain are caused by muscle strain or some soft tissue injury,” Dr. Jeremy Denning, a neurosurgeon with Baylor Scott & White’s Plano medical staff, reminds us. “Typically these are self-limited and get better over a brief period of time (1-3 weeks). For those cases that do require medical treatment, most can be addressed with conservative treatment modalities such as physical therapy and/or pain management.”

So remember, your body is a temple. It should be nourished properly, strengthened and exercised consistently, and listened to always. ▀