How to Treat Back Pain With MS

by PATRICIA BRATIANU

What Is the Cause of MS Back Pain?

According to experts at the United States Department of Veteran's Affairs, over 50 percent of people who have a diagnosis of MS experience severe, constant pain. Some pain experts believe that 80 percent of people who have MS experience troubling pain at some point during their disease process.

Back pain may be directly caused by MS lesions; this is nerve pain. Back pain may also be due to spasms and debility that result from MS. A wide array of treatment modalities may be used to relieve MS back pain symptoms.

Nerve Pain

Nerve pain may be constant or intermittent. It is often described as burning, sharp, or shooting. It may radiate from your back down to your groin or legs. Some people experience nerve pain as "shock-like" or stabbing.

L'hermitte's sign is an intense pain sometimes experienced by people who have MS. It feels like an electric shock traveling down the length of the spine. The pain may travel down the legs to the toes and radiate throughout the arms to the fingertips. Fortunately, the pain usually lasts for just a few seconds and resolves without intervention.

Skeletal and Soft Tissue Pain

Pain may occur suddenly due to spasms and cramping of muscles. Sensations of throbbing, tightness and aching may occur. It may be accompanied by numbness, tingling, or head pain. You may feel as if you have a tight band around your back and chest.

You have an increased likelihood of experiencing low back and hip pain due to your disease. Spasticity and muscle weakness strain your spine and connective tissues. Pain may occur due to weakness from impaired posture. This is likely to occur if you require a cane or walker in order to get around.

Spasticity, or muscle stiffness and spasms, is due to damage MS causes in your brain and spinal cord. Messages are not transmitted properly between your nerves and the tissues in your body. Your muscles tighten and painful spasms develop.

Other Causes of Pain

Pain may be caused by complications of MS. It is important to have back pain evaluated by your health care provider so that the cause of your pain can be identified. Some causes of back pain include:

- Physical stress due to weakness or impaired mobility may result in achiness and spasms.
- Contractures, which occur when muscle fibers remain tight over a joint. The joint may become"frozen"

and immobile.
- Sitting or lying in one position for extended periods of time can lead to developing painful bed sores. Your skin can break down, and an infection may develop, causing further pain. The tailbone area is especially prone to bedsore formation; however bedsores may form over the middle of your back, hips, and shoulders.
- If you are constipated, you may feel discomfort in your lower back.
- Back pain is common among adults regardless of whether they have MS, so causes unrelated to the condition must be considered. For example, structural problems, such as a slipped disc or a kidney infection, cause back pain to arise.

Factors That May Make Back Pain Worse

As a person who has a chronic disabling condition, you have an increased risk of suffering from anxiety and depression. These conditions cause your muscles to become tense which worsens pain.

Many people who have MS feel isolated. You may feel like you are a burden to others at times. This can worsen feelings of depression and pain.

You may be very sensitive to changes in temperature. This is due to changes within your body which are a direct result of MS. Your back pain may be worse when the weather is hot or humid.

MS can make your skin may experience pain differently than other people. For example, fabric from a shirt or tight clothing may cause a sensation of pain.

If you are ill with an infection or are not sleeping well, your ability to tolerate pain may diminish temporarily.

Next page: Treatment for MS back pain options.

Treatment for MS Back Pain: What Are the Options?

Because the causes of back pain are so varied, a wide array of treatment modalities is used. Interventions range from simple home remedies – such as placing a pillow behind your back when sitting and changing your position frequently – to surgery.

Factors to consider when exploring your options for reducing back pain include:

- What is the nature of the pain?
- Is the pain continuous or intermittent?
- How does the pain interfere with the quality of your life?
- What does your health care provider recommend?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of available treatment modalities?
- How quickly can you expect to feel better?
- What are interventions that you have used in the past which worked or did not work for you
- How much does the treatment cost – in terms of time, energy, and money?

Physical and Occupational Therapy

Therapists provide services that can help to preserve the function of your muscles, thereby preventing MS back pain from occurring. They do this via the use of exercises, stretching, and the application of supportive devices, such as splints or braces.

Your therapist may recommend that you exercise in a heated pool in order to relieve pain, enhance flexibility, and promote feelings of well-being. Therapists may use a hot or cold pack to relieve pain. They may utilize specialized equipment such as ultrasound, or transcutaneous electronic nerve stimulating devices (TENS).

Alternative and Complementary Therapies

Yoga may be beneficial for you. Studies indicate that yoga reduces pain, enhances mood, and improves energy levels among individuals who have a diagnosis of MS. Acupuncture, acupressure, biofeedback, and relaxation techniques may be helpful too.

Low-level laser therapy is a safe treatment option which relieves back and neck pain. It can be beneficial for any pain which involves muscles, or connective tissues. Low-level laser therapy may improve your mobility and range of motion. You may obtain immediate relief after just one session.

Various massage techniques may be helpful; however, some people who have MS find that touch increases their pain level. Myofascial release is a specific touch therapy which works on the fascia, a special kind of connective tissue that is interwoven throughout all of the tissues of your body.

To perform a myofascial release, a practitioner applies gentle hand pressure to your body and holds it for approximately two minutes before proceeding to the next area. This technique is very gentle and may be used even if your MS is advanced or if you are frail.

Osteopathic manipulation is a touch therapy which restores the flow of fluid within your brain and spine. It is used to relieve back, joint, and neck pain as well as headaches. Osteopaths use the technique to restore the energy pathways of your body and relieve stress.

Medication

Antispasmodic, anti-inflammatory, and relaxant drugs are used to relieve muscle spasms and spasticity. Some of these medications are controlled substances which may cause drowsiness.

While most medications are taken orally, some people benefit from the use of patches, injections, or indwelling pumps that deliver medications directly to painful areas.

Surgery

When pain is severe or does not respond to other treatment options, surgery may be used to provide relief. Part of the spinal nerve which affects the painful area may be severed. Tendons may be cut in order to relieve tension due to painful, tight muscles.

What's Next for Multiple Sclerosis and Back Pain Problems?

Treatment of pain caused by MS is often complex. Preventative techniques are essential if your disease is in its early stages.

If you have pain, you may need to employ several techniques to obtain relief. Fortunately, many options are available. Work with your health care team to determine which strategies are best for you and your MS back pain.