



How to Best Manage Your Back Pain

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I remember the day with the kind of awful clarity you have recalling, say, a car crash you were in.

It was late November 2000. I was staying at a hotel in Austin, Texas, where I was covering the Bush post-election recount drama. I woke up with a piercing pain in my lower back. I'd never before had back pain and it scared me. I would soon learn that my life would be divided by that day. There were the pre-back pain years and the years since that morning.

My back doesn't hurt all the time. I can go days, sometimes weeks pain-free. But it always comes back, the same piercing pain I first experienced in Austin but sometimes it is accompanied by an ache over a larger area and, in recent years, I've also developed a tingling down my right leg when I stand too long.

An estimated 26 million Americans suffer from chronic back pain. It has been estimated that back pain drains \$100 billion a year from the U.S. economy in lost work days and diminished productivity, though I suppose those figures may be slightly counterbalanced by all the money sufferers pour into analgesics, medications and treatments.

Over the past 11 years, I have tried physical therapy, acupuncture, epidural steroid injections, exercise and something called Rolfing. Some of these treatments provided temporary relief. Nothing worked permanently. So, when I was assigned by World News with Diane Sawyer to do a story on innovative treatments for back pain, I approached it with more than just a professional interest.

We started with a visit to Dr. Andre Panagos, a private physician in New York City who specializes in pain management.

"The second most common visit to primary physicians is back pain," Panagos told me. "So, I see a lot of back pain patients."

On his computer, we were able to call up on the results of an MRI I had in 2007. Panagos peered at the black-and-white images, then pointed at something that meant nothing to me.

"This MRI shows the most significant finding being at the S-1 L-5 segment," he says referring to the lower spine. "This (disc) edge here is more toward the back than this edge here. It's degenerative. If it narrows to where the nerves are very tight or compressed it causes a lot of pain in the lower back or legs."

He said I also had tiny fractures on my spine that could also be contributing to my back pain.

I mentioned that my back was often especially painful and stiff after playing golf.

What he said next stunned me.

"I do not like to tell people not to do things, but with what you have here on this MRI, you really should not play golf," he said.

"Ever again?"

"Correct."

As I researched further, I learned that the professional golfer Fred Couples had suffered from almost crippling back pain until, he says, he went to see a doctor in Dusseldorf, Germany, named Dr. Peter Wehling. Wehling discovered a treatment for osteoarthritis and lower back pain that he calls Regenokine. To simplify a process that is actually quite complex, it basically involves taking the anti-inflammatory proteins from a person's own blood and then injecting them back into the body at the site of inflammation. Wehling's theory is that it is not the mechanics of the body that causes osteoarthritis or lower back pain, but the inflammation triggered by the physical problem.

Coping With Back Pain

In his book, "The End of Pain," Wehling writes: "(Regenokine) creates almost immediate improvement in many patients. In others, it can take several weeks to reach full effect. The impact of the therapy typically lasts two to four years. We are convinced that the number of spinal operations in the U.S. and other countries could be reduced by approximately one-third if (it) were applied. This, of course, would represent a major achievement in the treatment of low back pain."

A week later, I was in Dusseldorf, meeting Wehling at his gleaming clinic. Wehling is an energetic, cheerful man in his 40s and speaks impeccable, colloquial English. I watched as he injected the serum through long thin needles into the shoulder of one patient and

into the lower backs of two others. One of the back pain sufferers said he felt immediate relief.

"Out of 100 people, 75 to 80 profit highly from the procedure and significantly," Wehling said. He cited what he said were two clinical studies supporting the effectiveness of his treatment. He said several dozen other physicians in Germany do the same procedure. As of now, only one physician does these treatments in the U.S., the co-author of his book, Dr. Christopher Renna, in Santa Monica, Calif.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has not given its approval for the treatment to make the claim of effectiveness for osteoarthritis or back pain. Wehling says that requires further, larger studies that would take at least two more years. But word from some of the wealthy patients and professional athletes who've been treated by Wehling has driven a thriving practice in the treatment.

On the day I visited, Wehling was at his desk reading an ESPN news report that pro basketball players Tracy Mc Grady and Kobe Bryant had been treated with Regenokine. Citing patient confidentiality, Wehling would not comment. But shortly after I returned to the U.S., Couples won a golf tournament and told the Golf Channel he had undergone Regenokine treatment.

"It's been amazing for me. I will probably go back in December and January and I hope I get the same results. I do have some major back problems. He took all the pain away and I feel very, very good," Couples said.

Any reputable doctor will tell you the first line of treatment of back pain is to do nothing. Rest and see if it goes away. In many cases, it does. If you have chronic, persistent back pain, as I do, many doctors recommend first trying exercise or physical therapy.

A few years ago, I met a physical therapist named Ming Chew. So I went to see him at his Manhattan office to discuss his treatment which involves massaging and working the body's soft tissue.

"The body is like a fabric," Chew said. "And a fabric needs to be smooth and soft and supple. So when you put scar tissue in it, it creates adhesions, thickening of the fascia."

Chew claimed that four out of five of his patients get long-term relief from back pain. I watched as we worked on two patients. Chew believes that the place where you feel pain may not, in fact, be the source of the pain.

"I was actually treating the opposite side on the front part of his body to tear his left lower back," he said of one of his patients. "You're going to say why would I be treating the opposite? Because that's where his problems were."

Another cutting edge procedure is stem cell treatment. Among others who have had it, Texas Gov. Rick Perry reportedly credits stem cell with relieving his excruciating back pain. Stem cell treatment is also not approved by the FDA.

It is difficult to say which treatment is best for any individual's back pain. For some, acupuncture works wonders. Others profit from exercise or physical therapy. Ming Chew's patients who we spoke to said myo-fascial therapy made them feel much better. Wehling has a thick dossier of patients who will testify that Regenokine relieved or even cured their pain. All of the experts we spoke to agreed on one thing: avoid surgery until or unless it is absolutely necessary.