



Four Tips to Help Prevent Back Injury Reoccurrence



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On top of being able to help relieve a client's back pain, find out some suggestions that massage therapists can offer on how to prevent it from happening again.

Massage therapists are accustomed to working on clients with back pain. By some estimates, approximately 20 percent of all massage therapy visits are for back pain relief. Besides having the skills to triumph over back pain, bodyworkers also have the potential to educate their clients on how to prevent back re-injury.

Accounting for over 70 million doctor visits each year, back pain is the source of great suffering and disability for a significant portion of Americans. Despite its prevalence,

pinpointing back pain's cause and effective treatment remains remarkably challenging. Some of the most respected theories describing back pain's etiology include:

- Muscular fatigue
- Tendon, ligament or muscle strain
- Psoas muscle imbalance
- Intervertebral disc problems
- Emotional stress

Although there are a wide variety of theories explaining why back pain happens so frequently, physicians are typically limited to pain medications, cortisone injections and surgery for its treatment. Sometimes, these approaches are necessary for those in extreme pain. However, drugs, injections and surgery usually don't address the original cause of back pain.

Massage for Back Pain

Luckily, massage therapists are well equipped to alleviate the cause of back pain where Western medicine cannot. According to a 2003 study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, massage is a proven and cost-effective treatment for persistent back pain. Compiled from reviews of controlled trials evaluating acupuncture, massage therapy and spinal adjustments, researchers concluded that massage therapy was the only one of the three modalities to demonstrate a positive effect on back pain at the end of a 10-week treatment period and at the end of one year following treatment.

Even though massage therapy can help relieve back pain, preventing a back injury is always easier than repairing one. Unfortunately, when under physical or emotional stress, back pain frequently recurs. Thus, one of the most valuable ways to help those with back pain is to teach them how to avoid re-injury.

Four Tips to Prevent Back Pain

1. *Take Frequent Chair Breaks* – Even though most people's work and study schedules relegate them to a chair for most of the day, the torso was not designed to be static for five or more hours at a time. According to Andre Panagos, MD, a physiatrist specializing in sports medicine and co-director of the New York Presbyterian Hospital Spine Center, "Prolonged sitting inactivates the core muscles, which are responsible for supporting the back." Taking breaks every 20 to 30 minutes gives muscles a chance to relax and

releases unnecessary tension around the joints. Taking a few moments to stretch and twist the torso to invigorate circulation, then lying down with the knees bent will help relax back muscles.

2. *Lift Correctly* – Even though it can injure the back, many of us forget to check our body mechanics while lifting things. Remember these pointers to make sure you lift correctly: first, stretch your legs and back, begin close to the object, stand with your feet apart with one foot slightly in front of the other for greater stability, bend your knees and squat, lift straight up without twisting or bending the torso and bring the object close to the body.
3. *Quit Smoking* – Adding to the long list of reasons to stop smoking, cigarettes also contribute to back pain. Nicotine blocks the transport of oxygen and important nutrients to the spine's discs. Starved of oxygen, the discs are less able to repair themselves and tend to collapse at a much earlier age than is seen in non-smokers. Known as degenerative disc disease, this leading cause of chronic back pain can be prevented by kicking the smoking habit.
4. *Exercise the Mid-Section* – The health of the back depends on the muscular endurance of the body's core muscles. Exercises that strengthen and stretch the back and abdomen will reduce back injury risk. While a physician or physical therapist should be consulted if a back problem is present, the following types of exercise have helped many strengthen and stretch their core muscles: yoga, pilates and swimming.

If therapists truly want to help their clients overcome back pain, a two-step process is warranted. The first is to hone their massage skills for relieving back pain, and the second is to guide their clients toward back pain prevention. Clients can effectively reduce the risk of back re-injury by taking frequent chair breaks, lifting correctly, eliminating smoking and performing mid-section strengthening exercises.