

According to Reddy, a patient with lower back pain should try every possible conservative strategy for reducing or eliminating LBP. They include patient education, physical therapy, medication and spinal injections.

However, those conservative methods aren't the only potential healers for lower back pain. Dr. Mark Dean, a partner with Riverside Interventional Consultants, a division of Riverside Radiology and Intervention Associates, says massage, hydrotherapy and even acupuncture are viable treatment methods.

If those treatment strategies prove unsuccessful, a patient's next step could be a visit to Dean, whose work focuses on lower back pain, headaches, neck problems and pelvic issues. Most of the patients he sees are referred by either neurosurgeons or family physicians. "The timing of visits is before surgery of any kind," he says.

First, he conducts an in-depth interview of the patient, inquiring about their medical and physical histories. The next step includes diagnostic tests, such as an X-ray or MRI, among other exams. Upon reviewing the results, Dean formulates a "list of four of the most probable reasons for the LBP."

Treatments, however, will have little to no effect on LBP if the pain is caused by complicated medical issues, such as obstructions in parts of the body or spinal tumors. Because these more complex medical problems demand intensive and often immediate treatments, Dean relishes his role as an interventionist. "I think it's important for a radiologist to meet with a patient before making an assessment. That goes a long way to uncovering what's really troubling the patient," he says.

He recites an instance when his philosophy proved extremely fortunate for a patient. "A middle-age patient came to me with LBP. I was able to determine he was actually stricken with prostate cancer. It was presenting as LBP, but had metastasized to other parts of his body," says Dean.

Epidural injections are another treatment option for LBP sufferers, says Dean. The medicine "acts like WD-40 to reduce nerve sensitivity. Epidural injections act like a grease to encourage or at least reduce pain messages being transmitted to the brain. The effectiveness of such an epidural varies patient to patient. It could last months or even a few years."

An Ounce of Prevention

"Don't smoke," cautions Mendel. There are several reasons why lighting up might be bad for your back. One involves fusion. That's when screws are surgically implanted in a patient's back and bones to "encourage joining bone with the screws. Smoking interferes with that process," says Mendel.

Another reason smoking can be harmful to

one's back is that it impacts the capacity of the lungs to intake and exhale oxygen. The lack of clean oxygen affects not only a patient's ability to recover from, say, back surgery, it also inhibits its flow to the brain, a key element in recuperation.



"The majority of LBP is due to poor posture in everyday life," says Dr. Gregory Mavian, a neurosurgeon and partner with OrthoNeuro. "Our sedentary lifestyles and occupations are killing us."

He also suggests people not carry excess weight. "That's a big deal because it reduces strain," he says. Not surprisingly, exercise is a key factor in having a healthy back. It provides core muscle strength so the body doesn't carry its entire load on the spine.

OrthoNeuro's Mavian says, "The majority of LBP is due to poor posture in everyday life," noting that poor physical conditioning and inactivity are major contributors to lower back pain.

"Our sedentary lifestyles and occupations are killing us," he says.

Another Option

Lee, the former football player, says after running that marathon, he soon underwent back surgery to have two vertebrae fused. He spent four days in the hospital followed by a week recuperating at home in bed. Two weeks later, he could drive. Within a few months, he was pain free. "I even played golf," he says.

Two years of relative comfort passed until new back pains appeared. The pain became so severe that within a few months, Lee says he "could not walk more than a few hundred yards without excruciating pain." He spent a sizable chunk of change purchasing special chairs, seat cushions and braces as he sought to transform every workspace into an ergonomically correct place to sit. Still, the intense discomfort continued.

As it happens, a friend and fellow LBP sufferer told Lee about Thuy Bowyer, owner and operator of M.T. Wellness Clinic on the city's north side.

Bowyer's clinic specializes in medical restorative massage therapy. The goal is to "restore physical function through restorative massage therapy and to reduce pain," she says. Her clinic relies on client/therapist communication combined with both active and passive techniques designed to minimize discomfort and restore physical function. Active techniques require the patient to work along with the therapist to stretch or massage specific muscles while passive techniques call for the therapist to do all the work. "That's designed and intended to reduce pain," she says.

Patients at M.T. Wellness also are taught "self-care"—stretching that can positively contribute to future well-being, says Bowyer.

According to Bowyer, more than half the patients at M.T. Wellness complain of LBP. "It's among the top three reasons patients come here," she says.

Bowyer balks at descriptions labeling her clinic's therapies as alternative medicine. "We utilize a medical model, so we like to think we partner with the medical community. Our assessments are based on science" directly correlated to physical medicine and rehabilitation, she says. M.T. Wellness also collaborates with more than 100 doctors, she says, including neurologists, neurosurgeons, orthopedists and even general practitioners.

Lee is a believer. After just his first appointment with Bowyer, "I felt almost immediate relief. I have seen her ever since," he says. In the 18 months he has been Bowyer's patient, Lee has weaned himself off all pain medications and is living a fuller life.

"I am 90 percent pain free and I don't have to take any meds. It sounds cliché, but she has given my life back to me," Lee says. ♦

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