



Massage therapist Michele Moss of Neuromuscular Healthcare in Raleigh says many of the patients she sees for lower back pain have tried a variety of therapies that failed.
Staff Photo by Takaaki Iwabu

Study: Back complaints rise in N.C

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If misery loves company, then people with lower back pain have a growing legion of commiserators.

During the past 14 years, the number of North Carolinians who report chronic lower back pain has more than doubled.

"That's surprising. We were expecting that it would go up somewhat, but not this much," said Dr. Timothy Carey, director of the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research at UNC-Chapel Hill. He is co-author of a study published Monday in the Archives of Internal Medicine.

The findings have large implications for health-care spending.

Back pain sufferers visit the doctor an average of 19 times, plus spend money on massages, physical therapy, pain pills, chiropractic visits and surgeries. All told, treating spinal problems costs an estimated \$86 billion in the United States, according to a study published last year in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Les Taylor, 55, of Raleigh, estimates he's spent more than \$10,000 out of pocket over the past 10 years on back remedies. Insurance paid for three surgeries, but he's also been to chiropractors, physical therapists and massage therapists. Now he exercises, uses magnets and visits a massage therapist regularly.

"My doctor said I need to take care of myself," Taylor said. "I took that to heart."

For the study, UNC-CH researchers conducted a statewide telephone survey of more than 5,300 people in 2006 and found that 10.2 percent had back pain that lingered more than three months. That's up more than twofold from 1992, when a survey of more than 4,400 people found 3.9 percent of respondents saying they were afflicted.

Carey said one treatment -- exercise -- is underused and underappreciated by too many doctors and patients alike. Yet it's free.

"It's not a cure," he said, "but people who exercise on a regular basis as instructed by a doctor or physical therapist feel better and can do more. It's a very safe treatment."

And exercise might help with the cause of many people's affliction. Carey said his study did not search for reasons why more people suffer back pain -- it could be simply that more people report the malady. But the increase in lower back troubles correlates to a similar doubling in the rate of obesity.

Fat equals pain

Doctors who treat back patients note a direct connection. Dr. Kenneth Carnes, of Raleigh Neurosurgery Associates, said carrying extra pounds adds stress to the spine.

"All the extra weight and pressure is being centered in the low back and spine," Carnes said. "That puts a lot of wear and tear on tissues -- bone and ligaments and soft tissues. The end result is pain."

As a first approach, he said, he typically recommends exercises to strengthen a patient's stomach and back muscles.

"Things people can do are really common sense -- a good diet, weight control and exercise," Carnes said.

Michele Moss, a massage therapist at Neuromuscular Healthcare in Raleigh, said many of the patients she sees for lower back pain have tried numerous other therapies to no avail -- often because muscle pain doesn't show up on scans.

"Muscles get lost" in many diagnoses, she said. And for people who are overweight and sedentary, muscles become underused, even as they are asked to haul more.

"Our bodies weren't meant to sit for eight hours," Moss said. "We were meant to be active."

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STRETCH YOUR BACK

To strengthen your back, the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons recommends starting easy with abdominal contractions, then gradually building to stretches using an exercise ball.

BEGINNER

Abdominal stretch

1. Lie on your back with knees bent and hands resting below ribs.
2. Tighten abdominal muscles to squeeze ribs down toward back.

3. Be sure not to hold breath.

4. Hold 5 seconds.

5. Relax.

6. Repeat 10 times.

INTERMEDIATE

Hamstring stretch

1. Lie on your back with legs bent.

2. Hold one thigh behind knee.

3. Slowly straighten knee until a stretch is felt in back of thigh.

4. Hold 20 seconds.

5. Relax.

6. Repeat 5 times on each side.

ADVANCED

Hip flexor stretch

1. Lie on your back near edge of bed, holding knees to chest.

2. Slowly lower one leg down, keeping knee bent, until a stretch is felt across top of the hip/thigh.

3. Hold 20 seconds.

4. Relax.

5. Repeat 5 times on each side.

For pictures and more stretches, go to <http://orthoinfo.aaos.org/> and click on "Other Treatment and Rehabilitation" from the main menu bar on the left.

BY THE NUMBERS

80 PERCENT of the population will experience an episode of lower back pain at some point in their lives.

95 PERCENT of people will recover within a few months.

85 PERCENT of people will have a subsequent flareup.

SOURCE: ARCHIVES OF INTERNAL MEDICINE