

Degenerative Spinal Disease

- ◆ The process of age-related change or degeneration in the tissues and structures of the spine is something that will happen to all people at some point in their lives.
- ◆ For some, the process can start in their late teens and early twenties, usually because of an accident or excessive, stressful activity.

As we get older the term 'wear and tear' comes into play. Some 60-80% of the population have backache lasting more than 24 hours at some time in their lives! At any time around one in five of the adult population has back pain, so you are not alone. Some occupations such as manual workers, drivers, sedentary office workers and nursing staff are known to have a higher incidence of back pain than the average.

The spine is made up of bone, disc, muscle and ligaments that protect the nerves in the spinal and root canals. Discs, joints and ligaments which allow and sustain movement all undergo a process of change with age.

Disc degeneration

Intervertebral discs comprise of two kinds of tissue

- ◆ an outer fibrous casing called the annulus fibrosus
- ◆ an inner jelly-like centre called the nucleus pulposus

Discs are mostly made up of water. When we are young they generally remain healthy with little loss of fluid. Once we hit 30, the outer fibres become stiffer and are more likely to crack, the water content decreases all of which can lead to a 'prolapsed' or 'herniated' disc. By the age of 50 - 60, the discs are thinner and drier with a much smaller centre (nucleus). As the discs gradually thin, they may lose their ability to act as shock absorbers and become unable to maintain the space between two vertebrae.

As the discs change, other problems can occur, such as changes in the facet joints (small joints behind the vertebrae which help stabilise the spine) and the formation of bony growths around the edges of the vertebrae (called osteophytes). Swollen facet joints can be a source of back pain and osteophytes can cause pressure on nerves in the spinal and root canals.

As the discs become thinner the vertebrae are brought closer together, in turn the ligaments become slacker and the facet joints looser. This can lead to misalignment of the facet joints that may cause pain. For most people, these changes occur gradually and nature can usually cope with a painless process of degenerative change. However, a sudden change, caused naturally or through injury, can result in a bout of back pain.

For those who experience pain there are a variety of techniques that may help.

What can you do?

The first thing is to talk to your GP, who can help with pain relief and give you guidance on how to look after your back, (including advice on keeping active). The GP may feel that a visit to a physiotherapist, osteopath or chiropractor might help. It is worth noting that physiotherapy is often the only manual therapy currently available on the NHS, and you may want to see someone privately (contact numbers for the professional associations of the therapists are listed below).

In some cases, on the advice of your GP, an opinion from an orthopaedic or neurosurgical specialist may be needed. They will be able to assess you, arrange further investigation if necessary, and offer you advice on appropriate treatment. A very small number of people (between 1-5%) will require back surgery, and these will usually be cases where there are signs of nerve root compression such as leg pain below the knee, numbness, pins and needles, loss of reflexes and muscle tone.

For very severe or long-term spinal pain, your GP or consultant may refer you to a pain clinic or pain management programme. Here, you will learn ways to manage your pain, and your own situation.

Complementary therapies such as acupuncture, reflexology and aromatherapy may help with pain relief and relaxation. The Alexander Technique teaches people how to improve their posture and may also be useful. It is important to remember that we are all individuals and will respond differently to the various treatments and therapies - what works for one person may not necessarily work for another.

For more information you can visit our website www.backcare.org.uk.

Useful Contacts

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

Website: www.csp.org.uk Tel: 020 72421941

General Osteopathic Council

www.osteopathy.org.uk Tel: 020 7357 6655

General Chiropractic Council

www.gcc-uk.org Tel: 0207 713 5155

Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique

www.stat.org.uk Tel: 0207 482 5135