



Catholic Healthcare West

Ask the Expert
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Q. I have been suffering from pain in my lower back and have scheduled an appointment with my primary care physician. Can you tell me more about what might be causing it?

A. Back pain is the most common cause of debilitation for those under the age of 45 and vies with the common cold as the main reason people visit their primary care physician. More than 400,000 Americans file for workman's compensation annually due to back pain, making it the leading cause for missed work. And chronic disability resulting from low back pain continues to rise exponentially.

The overwhelming majority of low back pain is defined as nonspecific versus pain which can be attributed to trauma, a systemic disease such as a tumor, infection, or a rheumatologic disorder, or pain which is referred from the viscera. Despite the fact that medical care for low back pain is specialist-oriented and of high technology and cost, 40 percent of Americans will seek care from a chiropractor. At least 80 percent of the population will complain of back pain sometime in their lives. Fortunately, the pain is usually self-limited and lasts anywhere from four to six weeks in 50 percent of sufferers, but the recurrence rate is approximately 85 percent.

Although few patients can be given a diagnosis, guidelines have been established for both diagnosis and treatment.

- For acute low back pain in patients under the age of 50 who show no signs of disease, we can treat the patient's symptoms without extensive imaging. Most of these patients can expect to become pain free and may benefit from taking Tylenol, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) or muscle relaxants.
- For those who have been diagnosed with chronic low back pain, which is defined as pain that has lasted for more than three months and may result in some disability and psychological distress, joint blocks can be used to localize pain.

Because the spine is an intimate arrangement of many structures including nerve roots, muscles, and bones, among others, disease in one area can produce symptoms that are similar in character to those of another. You'll want to work with your primary care physician to determine the cause of your pain. He or she will examine your back muscles and spine to check for pain, muscle tenderness or weakness, stiffness, numbness, or abnormal reflexes.

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