

COMMON BACK PAIN MYTHS

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80% of all Canadians will suffer from at least one significant episode of back pain in their lives. Below are some of the common myths surrounding back pain and what modern science has to say about them.

Myth 1: *If you've injured a disc (i.e., herniation, rupture), you must have surgery.*

Truth: Surgery to relieve back pain should only be used as a last resort. Even if specific testing reveals a damaged disc, recovery often results without surgery. An injured disc in the back may become inflamed and put pressure on nerves and surrounding pain sensitive structures. Non-surgical treatment aims at minimizing pain and discomfort from joint irritation and muscle spasm, and prescribing specific exercises to help with recovery.



Myth 2: *Most back pain is caused by injuries or heavy lifting.*

Truth: Injuries caused by heavy lifting do not account for all back pain. In up to 85% of cases, individuals can't recall a specific incident that brought on their back pain. Back pain can result from a single exposure to a bending or twisting incident, or it can be caused by small cumulative loads placed on the spine over time. Scientific research also links the following risk factors to back pain: smoking, being overweight, poor posture, poor physical fitness, and stressful life events.

Myth 3: *X-ray images, CT and MRI scans can always identify the cause of pain.*

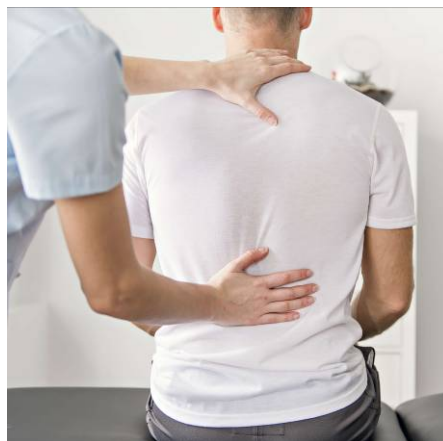
Truth: Even the best imaging tests cannot identify a muscle spasm or ligament sprain that may be the cause of pain. Imaging is usually reserved for special cases such as those suffering trauma in a fall or accident, surgical candidates, unresolved cases of severe chronic back pain, and suspicion of underlying tumor, infection or other serious disease.

Myth 4: *If your back hurts, you should take it easy until the pain goes away. Bed rest is the mainstay of therapy.*

Truth: Clinical data indicates that individuals who remain active do better than those who try bed rest. Remaining active means continuing with daily activities as tolerated and easing back into a regular routine. Activities may have to be modified while recovery occurs, but movement is important for recovery provided it does not put the individual at risk for further injury.

Myth 5: *Diagnosing back pain is simple and straightforward.*

Truth: The causes of back pain can be complex and difficult to diagnose. There are many biological tissues that can generate pain in the back. These may include muscles, ligaments, bones, nerves, and joints. Quite often it is a combination of several or all of these structures that can manifest into back pain, and potentially radiating pain into the buttock or leg regions. Sometimes stress and depression can also contribute to back pain. A licensed health practitioner who deals with back pain is best trained to diagnose the source(s) of your problem and prescribe appropriate therapy when required. For more information, visit www.nhwc.ca.



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