



Minimize the Risk for Back Injury

BY OTESA MIDDLETON MILES

A study by the North American Spine Society says that a third of Americans have back pain nearly every day and 10 percent of those surveyed described the pain as constant.

When it comes to back pain, prevention is the best medicine.

As the weather warms many people start playing sports more frequently, working in the garden, cleaning the yard and continuing their spring cleaning, which often involves lifting heavy objects. But beware; improper preparation can lead to back injury and pain that outlasts the sunny season. Dr. Terry L. Thompson, professor and chair of the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery at Howard University Hospital (HUH), urges proper planning and preparation to avoid back pain.

Some 80 percent of adults in the U.S. have experienced back pain according to a survey released in April by Consumer Reports Health Ratings Center. The survey also notes that back pain often disrupts daily life. More than half of the 14,000 who responded to the poll said that back pain severely limited their daily routine for at least a week, while 46 percent said the pain made it difficult to sleep. Another study, by the North American Spine Society, reports that a third of Americans have back pain nearly every day and 10 percent of those surveyed described the pain as constant.

HUH is equipped to help patients with a wide range of back pain problems and injuries. “We are fully prepared to provide excellent evaluation and management for those patients who have back problems,” Thompson says, describing the Hospital’s team of orthopaedic surgeons and physiatrists (rehabilitation physicians). “The physiatrists provide most of the skeletal care and perform the initial evaluation and in some instances refer patients for diagnostic studies such as radiographs and MRIs, which are all available at Howard.”

The Hospital’s state-of-the-art Department of Orthopaedic Surgery offers patients multiple options for treating bones, joints, ligaments, tendons, muscles and nerves. The department’s doctors provide treatment in different specialties, including fractures; sports medicine; foot, ankle, hand and upper extremity surgery; joint replacement; arthritis surgery; spinal surgery and arthroscopy, which involves using a small video camera

with a light to examine the joints and tissues inside the body. The orthopaedic team is further supported by registered nurses, physical and occupational therapists, nutritionists/dietitians, orthopaedic technicians and social workers.

For cases where longer-term treatment is needed, the Hospital provides physical therapy and rehabilitation. “We are well-equipped to provide evaluation and care for those individuals who have back problems and back injuries that don’t improve,” Thompson explains. “In general, most back injuries are minor and self-limiting, meaning they will likely get better in a few days. If the pain is not debilitating, then it’s reasonable to rest and use some simple first aid measures such as ice and an over-the-counter pain reliever. If these measures aren’t effective, then the next step is to contact the primary care physician who may refer the patient for an orthopaedic or physiatric evaluation.”

KEYS TO PREVENTION

“There are simple steps that anyone should take to minimize the risk of back injuries,” says Thompson, a sports medicine specialist who also serves as head team physician for Howard University’s athletic department, as team



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Dr. Terry L. Thompson

physician for the District of Columbia Public Schools and as a neutral physician for the National Football League Player Benefits Plan.

He recommends using proper form and position when lifting objects. “Keep the back straight and avoid bending forward to lift a heavy object,” he says.

Back supports, often sold at drug stores, can also provide assistance. “Many people benefit from those devices,” says Thompson, who was named one of the top doctors in the Washington, D.C., area by *Consumer Checkbook* magazine. “Lifting causes a large number of back injuries.”

Often, people who aren’t regularly physically active begin new exercise regimens or start playing a sport in the summer. “These are the weekend warriors, who aren’t well-conditioned and are at a higher risk

of injury from playing softball, volleyball and basketball.”

Often, people who aren’t regularly physically active begin new exercise regimens or start playing a sport in the summer.

Before each athletic endeavor, Thompson recommends stretching to prepare the body. “Stretching is particularly important for those individuals who have had back problems in the past. It helps bring the muscles back out to their normal length and decreases stress on these muscles during activities,” he says.

“It’s important to remember that back pain and back injuries are very common,” says Thompson. “Proper mechanics should be used when lifting. Stretching should be a part of any preparation for vigorous athletic activities. By keeping these things in mind, people are less likely to develop back injuries.” ✓

For more information or to schedule an appointment, call **202-865-1183**.