

PERSONAL  
MESSAGE

## Understanding the Role of Physical Therapy

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**W**hen I treat a person with a back problem my primary focus is on helping this person return to his highest level of function, both at home and at work with the least amount of discomfort—and he must be safe from the risks of re-injury. That is a tall order to fulfill at times. It also requires that I address a lot of different aspects of the person's life in order to arm him with everything necessary to keep him safe from re-injury.

The more traditional model of Physical Therapy addresses the injury itself. Modalities, such as heat, ice, ultrasound and electrical stimulation to the muscles are just a few of the more common methods for reducing pain. Sometimes the modalities don't work and do not effectively reduce the pain. In this case some hands-on skilled treatment techniques, exercises and positioning can be very effective.

Decreasing the pain is important in interrupting the pain cycle. If this can be interrupted sufficiently, it not only can help the person be more comfortable but can also reduce the resulting muscle spasms.

There are a vast number of exercise approaches and techniques available to Physical Therapists (PTs) for correcting the underlying causes of back pain. There is no one right way. It is a matter of finding out what works for that person and his body to get the results needed. I particularly like having PTs with different skills working with me so that we have a wide variety of skills to use as necessary.

*"Education is the number one means for reducing back injuries. Physical Therapists have a primary role in this"*



Bruce Snell—Owner, NW Sports Physical Therapy

After reducing the pain and correcting the underlying problems I then move into the realm of improving the person's overall fitness level, especially in relation to his job. It includes educating the person on the things that contribute to back injuries and how to avoid them. This may include how to lift properly or how to set up his work station to reduce the strain. I frequently work with the person's employer to make sure his work station and job requirements will not jeopardize his safety at work. I will also educate him on how to take care of his back on a day to day basis to keep him safe and reduce the risks of re-injury.

Education is the number one means for reducing back injuries. Physical Therapists have a primary role in this because of their knowledge of how the body works and what causes injuries. The education they can provide can include ways to reduce pain, how to lift properly, how to set up one's work station, how to make oneself physically fit for one's job, how to maximize sleep with good positioning, etc., etc. The list is endless.

# BACK PAIN

## RISK FACTORS THAT CAUSE BACK PAIN AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT THEM

By Gaynor Hale, Physical Therapist



**B**ack problems strike people in all walks of life. It is very common to have back problems. In fact 8 out of every 10 people will be laid up with back pain at some point in their life. Back problems are the second leading reason people miss work. The first is the common cold.

Contrary to belief, back problems are not just a problem for heavy laborers. Actually, people with desk jobs and other more sedentary types of work have a slightly higher incident of back problems than those with heavy physical labor. Being very strong definitely gives you an advantage but does not protect you if you abuse your back. Likewise, having a light, easy job does not protect you either. A back injury can severely cripple you, your family, your finances and your happiness. It can tear your life apart.

Are back injuries, then, inevitable? Not necessarily. There is a lot you can do about it to prevent it from happening or to reduce the damage if it does occur and to speed your recovery.

The key is to reduce the risk factors that cause injury in the first place. What are those risk factors?

### 1. POOR POSTURE

Poor posture is one of the main reasons that injuries occur. This means that the spine's normal curves are either increased (i.e. a swayback posture or a forward head posture) or decreased and flattened out (i.e. your low back rounding out or flattening when you sit). Either way there is an increase in the strain on the muscles' ligaments and joints. The ideal scene for the spine is to have the normal, natural curves. In this position there is the least amount of strain on your back.

There is more pressure in your lower spine when you are sitting than standing or lying down. Also,



people tend to slump their lower back (round it out or decrease the natural inward curve) when they are sitting. This is very stressful to the muscles as well as the joints.

**What to do about it:** When you sit, place a small towel roll at your low back to help support and maintain the natural curve. Specific exercises can help you change your posture. Your Physical Therapist is an expert in exercises and can help you with the correct exercises and the correct sequence to improve your posture.

### 2. FORWARD BENDING

When you bend forward you are putting all your back muscles in a stretched out position and that decreases their strength. Therefore, you can very easily strain the muscles by requiring them to lift a weight, or just lifting your upper body from a bent over position. Because this position weakens the muscles, everything in your back is at risk of injury because it is the muscles that protect everything. The way they protect everything is by pulling you out of harmful positions. So don't put your back at a disadvantage and then ask it to do heavy work!

**What to do about it:** When trying to lift objects or reach below your waist, bend your hips and knees, keeping the natural curves locked in your spine. (Follow the Tips and Tricks on the following page) This not only is safer but also increases your lifting strength. Your Physical Therapist is highly trained in the proper way to lift

Keep a positive attitude about your job and homelife. Studies show that persons who are unhappy at work or home tend to have more back problems and take longer to recover than persons who have a positive attitude.

and position your body for any task you have to do. Have your PT show you how to do it safely.

### 3. DECREASED FLEXIBILITY

When your muscles and joints are tight and inflexible they can change the way you walk, sit, stand and move. When you try to move to do a task, tight muscles can be strained. The lack of flexibility in the muscles of your back and legs is a major risk factor for back injury.

**What you can do about it:** Stretching is the key! Stretching exercises also need to be done properly so that you don't cause injury to the muscles—i.e. “bouncing” to stretch tight muscles can cause tiny tears in them that make them sore and tighter. Consult your Physical Therapist to make sure you are doing the ones that are correct for you and that you are doing them safely.

### 4. POOR PHYSICAL FITNESS

A physically fit person is able to work more, play harder, and maintain their energy level longer than those who are not fit. Poorly conditioned muscles do not have the strength, flexibility or endurance that is needed to work properly and that sets you up for injury. Remember, brute strength does not necessarily mean good conditioning. Your ability to reduce the risks of back injury are directly linked to your overall state of physical fitness.

**What you can do about it:** Get on a general fitness program or recreational activity that is appropriate for you. Your Physical Therapist can guide you with this. Remember, “weekend warriors” (those who sit behind a desk all week then try to move mountains on the weekends) end up getting hurt. Get yourself fit for whatever activity you will be doing. Don't take chances.

### 5. ACCIDENTS

Some accidents are unavoidable. So if you should have an accident, you have less risk of serious injury if you are physically conditioned, use proper body posture and lifting techniques and have taken every effort to reduce the aggravations to your back throughout the day.

## Tips and Tricks

### TIPS AND TRICKS FOR SAFE LIFTING:

When lifting objects, back injuries can be avoided if you:

- 1. Keep a wide base of support.** Spread your feet apart with one foot slightly ahead of the other to make yourself more stable.
- 2. Keep the object close to you.** The farther the object is from you the more pressure there is on your low back.
- 3. Bend your knees and hips.** To pick up or set down objects you need to get your hands down to that level. Don't bend over at the waist, bend your hips and knees.
- 4. Maintain your low back curve.** This is the key! Lock in the spine so that you maintain that slightly inward curve in your low back.
- 5. Do not twist or bend sideways.** Face the object you are picking up or working on. If you must turn to change your direction, pivot on your feet.



- 6. Push rather than pull.** Pushing is easier for your back. Brace your hands on the object, lock your natural curve in your spine and slightly bend your knees. This will give you lots of pushing power—safely!



- 7. Use a step stool.** If you must reach over shoulder level, use a step stool to get up closer to the object to avoid more strain on the low back. It's not the weight of the object but the position of your back that causes injuries.



- 8. Get help.** If the object is too heavy or the size or shape is too awkward, ask for help or use some equipment designed to assist you.

**What you can do about it:** Keep yourself physically fit, use safe lifting techniques and posture, use proper tools, don't take short-cuts or try to “muscle through” a job when you have machinery to do it for you and set up your workstation in such a way that you eliminate unnecessary motions and strain such as bending and twisting. Here is where your Physical Therapist can be of tremendous assistance. They are trained to help fit your workstation to you in ways that reduce the stress and strain.

### 6. POOR WORK HABITS

Using unsafe posture, especially while lifting is a very poor and dangerous work habit. Motions that are repeated over and over in the same direction are also very hazardous. Habits can be changed and it is well worth the time and effort.

**What you can do about it:** Consult your Physical Therapist. They are the experts in helping you spot poor, unsafe work habits and they know what to do about them.

# FAQ

## Why are back problems so hard to get rid of?

Back injuries don't usually happen "overnight". They are an accumulation of aggravations and abuses from lifetime habits that add up over the years. So if you keep doing things the same way you will continually aggravate and damage your back regardless of how good the treatment is. Bad habits can also prevent you from recovering.

## What are the most damaging "habits" we can do to our backs?

The two most harmful things you can do to your back are bending and twisting. These motions not only cause irreparable damage to the muscles, ligaments, joints and the discs in your back but they also put your back in a weakened position. Unfortunately most people will bend over from the waist or twist their spine and then try to lift things. By doing so, you put your back in a weakened position and then ask it to do heavy work and then wonder why it hurts.

## How do you avoid bending and twisting?

You can avoid bending by locking your spine into position (with slight natural inward curve in the low back) and then bending with your hips and knees. This is the position the weight-lifters use to lift heavy weights. They use it because it is the safest and strongest position for their backs. You can avoid the twisting by making sure you are facing your task. In other words, have your shoulders and

hips facing the same direction. If you need to change directions, pivot on your feet. Shoes are cheaper to replace than your back!

## I work as a grocery store clerk and have to stand at the cash register for long periods of time. This makes my back ache a lot by the end of the day. What can I do?

Find a small box or a low step stool to place your foot on. This will allow one leg to bend at the hip and knee and will reduce the strain on your low back. You can change feet as frequently as you like. Try different heights and see what is the most comfortable for you.

## I have been out of work for 4 weeks with a back injury. My doctor is sending me back to work on "light duty". Does this mean I should have a desk job?

Sitting for long periods of time can actually be harmful to the low back. There is more pressure per square inch on your low back than there is standing or lying down. If you have to take a sitting job you can minimize the aggravation to your low back by using a chair that is properly fit for you and your work station and by getting up out of the chair every 15 to 20 minutes and doing a gentle back-bend. It would be a better option to have a job that allows you to sit for short periods of time as well as walk around. Some companies allow workers to "job-share". With this they can swap jobs with another worker at some time during the day or during the week so that their tasks are varied and they can change positions more often.

## Do you need to see a Physical Therapist for your back pain? Take this simple test...

*Simply place a check mark in the appropriate box. Once you are done, calculate the number of YESes and look at the results.*

YES	NO	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I wake up in the morning with pain in my back.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I get pain in my back when I walk.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I can not bend over easily without pain.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	My neck goes out at least twice a year.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I get a sharp pain from my low back down the back of my leg.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Exercising is too painful for my back.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I do not do any exercises for my back during the day.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I have to sit at a desk all day and my chair makes my back ache.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I am overweight and can not easily bend over to grab something.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	My back surgery has gotten rid of most of my pain but I still can't do my job yet.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	My back hurts everytime I lift one of my legs.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	My back keeps me awake at night.

### Results:

#### Less than 3 Yes

You're doing fine. Exercising may help keep your back in check.

#### Between 3 and 6 Yes

Physical Therapy could definitely be an option for you.

#### Between 6 and 10

We would advise you to see a doctor to get a better diagnosis, but Physical Therapy is definitely an option.



# Featured Physical Therapist

## Troy Lindstrom, DPT, ATC



Troy is a native to Washington State and was raised in Puyallup. He attended the University of Puget Sound (UPS) where he received his Bachelor of Science in Physical Education in 1999. During his undergraduate studies Troy also became a certified athletic trainer and had the opportunity to work in the training room and cover athletic events for UPS. He enrolled in the physical therapy program at UPS and in the spring of 2002 graduated with his Doctor of Physical Therapy degree. Troy has been a member of the NW Sports PT team since 2003 and works out of our Tacoma office. During the fall he provides athletic training services

for Stadium High School, working mainly with the football team covering both practices and events.

Although he is competent in all aspects of outpatient physical therapy, his special interests include treatment of the foot and ankle, orthotics, and functional training. Troy strives to create a fun and caring atmosphere where each treatment plan is tailored to the individual patient and progressed appropriately, resulting in achievement of functional goals. He also enjoys working as an athletic trainer because it gives him the opportunity to interact with athletes, but at the same time provides the challenge of returning the athletes to the field of play in a safe and efficient manner.

When not treating patients, Troy enjoys spending time outdoors, running, and golfing. He is also an avid Husky, Seahawks, and Mariners fan.

# SUCCESSES

## What patients are saying...

I came in for help with a sore neck and terrible shoulder pain from long bike rides.

I received manual work on my neck, which has given me tremendous relief from the pain. I also received isolated shoulder exercises and upper back and neck strengthening exercises that seem to have really helped.

Shoulder pain with bike rides isn't a problem. I can go farther before feeling any discomfort. Thank you! It was always a lot of fun to come in.

—S.P.

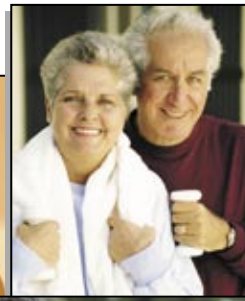
I've had a very stiff neck, shoulders, painful lower back and headaches at night. My doctor sent me to NW Sports PT for therapy. The therapists there worked with me through therapy and exercises and it's taken care of my problems.

It feels great to be able to enjoy living again!

—L.F.

NW Sports PT in Tacoma. After three weeks of treatment and exercises I've greatly improved. It's wonderful to be back to 100%.

Thanks!  
—S. L. P.



I was injured from lifting a heavy object.

After seeing other PTs for several months I did not notice any improvement. In fact, I was getting worse. My Doctor referred me to

I've experienced lower back pain and subsequent weakness and limited mobility for more than twenty years. After two back surgeries and physical therapy, my back is stronger and mostly without pain. I've now begun an exercise program designed by the therapists at NW Sports PT to further strengthen my back and core muscles. I know continued exercise using this program will ensure my strength and flexibility and allow me to continue all my activities. I'm really happy that I can work, play golf, hike and enjoy normal activities again.

—K.S.

# Tired of having **BACK PAIN?**



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## **FREE CONSULTATION**

Find out if Physical Therapy can help you ease the pain and help you gain a new outlook on life. Call us at:

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**Tacoma (253) 552-2525**

**Women's clinic (253) 851-7277**



**NW SPORTS**  
PHYSICAL THERAPY, INC.

Caring about you is our business at NW Sports Physical Therapy, Inc. Our Tacoma and Gig Harbor clinics provide physical therapy for a wide variety of conditions. We use a number of methods to decrease your pain, improve your mobility and make you stronger, healthier and happier.

The feeling you get here is one of caring, helpful staff in a friendly environment, assisting you in your desire to become more active or return to work or play.



**NW HAND**  
THERAPY, INC.

NW Sports Physical Therapy, Inc. also has two other clinics which focus on specific areas of concern. First, NW Hand Therapy specializes in the treatment of hand, wrist, elbow and shoulder problems. We have three occupational therapists who are also Certified Hand Specialists to serve your needs.



**NW WOMEN'S**  
PHYSICAL THERAPY

Second is our newest specialty area, NW Women's Physical Therapy. This clinic is dedicated exclusively to women's health and wellness. We have the ability to care for issues specific to women, in a warm, friendly environment. Our experienced therapists treat issues such as bladder and bowel incontinence, osteoporosis, pelvic floor pain, fibromyalgia as well as orthopedic rehabilitation.

**WE CARE ABOUT YOU!**  
**Call us today for a free consultation at**

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**Tacoma (253) 552-2525**

NW Hand Therapy

**Tacoma (253) 428-8292**

NW Women's Physical Therapy

**Gig Harbor (253) 851-7277**

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