



FLASH-FLASH-FLASH

Our New Braunfels clinic will open April 10, 2006 with the same great services as the other Texas MedClinics. The New Braunfels clinic is located at 958 IH35 North, exit 188 at Hwy 46.

URGENT CARE UPDATE

Texas MedClinic will begin accepting Cigna health insurance March 15, 2006. If you would like any additional information or have any questions please call Sabrina Gonzalez at 210-403-4214.

Pain Versus Injury

"No Pain, No Gain" "Get back in the saddle and ride again" "Pain is simply fear leaving the body". T-shirt slogans aside, how is one (athlete, injured worker or doctor) to know when pain is a significant injury which requires medical attention and when merely an expected response that should be worked through?



Pain is a subjective report of discomfort most people associate with serious injury or illness. It is also one of the most common patient problems seen by physicians. Some pain sources are obvious, like a broken finger. Others are not, such as a headache or back pain. This article will try to provide some helpful tips on the management of *musculoskeletal pain, such as low back pain and various overuse syndromes*. This article does not address such areas as chest pain, shortness of breath, or abdominal pain. It will hopefully provide some insight into the causes and sources of pain and factors that contribute to or reduce pain.

There are two major classes of pain, acute and chronic. Though the sensations are similar, they are very different types of pain with different causes, treatments and expectations of recovery. This article will focus exclusively on acute pain and not on chronic pain.

Each of us has experienced acute pain, the type associated with a toothache, a cut, or a burn. This is usually a signal that something is wrong. It can be protective, for example touching a hot stove causes one to pull his hand away and thus prevent a burn. Chronic pain continues for weeks, months, or even years. Chronic pain, unlike acute pain, seemingly serves no beneficial purpose. It is not a warning sign at all and often may have no clear cause or source. Examples of chronic pain are diabetic neuropathy, fibromyalgia, or chronic low back pain.

Does pain equal injury or illness?

The best answer is sometimes. Pain can be a sign of significant injury or illness, but it often signifies the body's response to stress, such as walking up 5 flights of stairs

when one has not done so in 6 months. The thighs and calves will burn or hurt by the time the top of the stairs is reached. There will likely be sore or painful calves and thighs the next day as well. One may be stiff and slow to get out of bed, but once up and moving the pain will usually subside. The pain may come and go throughout the day depending on activity.

Does continuing to work with pain mean that one is hurting oneself?

In most circumstances the answer is no. The opposite is often true, the "no pain, no gain" mantra does apply. By remaining active, one is actually improving body function, strength, and appearance.

One of the more common reasons for pain is actually inactivity. Attempting something in a manner that has not been done before, may result in some pain. This does not mean that there is a significant injury but only that the muscles are not accustomed to that activity and need to be developed over time to better perform that action. As one gets stronger and more active the pain will go away.

How does one know when an injury is present and/or that further activity may be harmful?

That is a difficult question to answer, and there is no simple response. However, there are a few keys on when to seek medical attention.

- Pain that is sudden in onset and severe
- Pain that does not improve within a short period (one or two days) of reduced activity
- Pain that is associated with swelling, discoloration or weakness
- Pain that is associated with a significant injury
- Pain that is associated with other symptoms such as weight loss, fever or decreased energy levels
- New pain particularly in persons at either end of the age spectrum

These situations call for a prompt medical evaluation.

There are times when people have significant injuries and do not have significant pain, such as an athlete competing in a soccer match who sustains a broken foot; due to adrenaline and sheer will he continues to play without noticing the pain.

This phenomenon can best be explained by a model called the "Gate Control Theory of Pain". This theory holds that the amount of pain "input" at the site of an injury is not always equal to the amount of pain experienced when the pain messages are perceived by the brain.

The "gate" is not a physical entity; rather it is a metaphor for the fact that the body has dramatic ways of modifying pain messages. The soccer player who broke his foot during the middle of a game felt little or no pain because he was so focused or distracted by the game he was unaware of the pain. Therefore, his "pain gate" was not open to allow full transmission of the pain message. If however, the same soccer player were simply walking to work and stepped off a curb wrong and broke the same bone, he would be more apt to notice or receive the full stimulus of pain, in other words the pain "gate" would be open. This may explain how relaxation techniques or focused concentration can be utilized to treat or manage pain.

Things that tend to make the pain experience more intense are stress, lack of sleep, poor conditioning, anxiety, boredom (pain is worse at night), and depression. Even certain personality types are more prone to feel pain. All of these are common in American

life and can be made worse by an uncaring or unsympathetic response to injury by the employer, co-worker, spouse, etc.

The severity, cause, and disability derived from pain are multifactorial and at times not consistent with the underlying cause. Remaining understanding and supportive of work modification and stress is important in helping employees remain at work in a productive manner with reduced pain and hopefully a speedy recovery. Showing interest in the pain is a better response than sympathy. Ask how the person is feeling, but refrain from lengthy discussions about the pain.

Specific causes for acute pain are not always easy to determine. For example, back pain, which is the most common work related injury, can be caused by gastrointestinal disorders, a kidney infection or stone, a prostate problem, vaginal disorder, aortic aneurysm, muscular back injury, disc disease, arthritis, and many other reasons. Discovering the underlying cause for back pain may require many detailed questions, exams, even multiple visits and tests by the physician to determine the cause of the pain. In the end, it is not uncommon for the physician to be unable to define the root cause of the pain. Although, by seeing a physician, the treatable and dangerous causes may be ruled out. This leads to one of the many common oxymorons of life. When it comes to what is causing a medical condition, patients are very focused on what it is; doctors, on what it's NOT!

Most people have heard the saying "pain is a part of life," and that is true. Most pain is short lived, serves a purpose (prevents further injury) and can be managed with simple medications, increased or reduced activity, stress reduction, and modification of the "pain gate". If the painful area swells, apply the RICE principle of Rest, Ice, Compression, and Elevation. If it becomes discolored, is severely painful or deformed, or the pain is persistent then seek medical attention.

Have you gained some insight into the complicated world of pain or are you more confused than ever? Pain is a part of life, don't take it too seriously, or you may make it more severe or last longer than it otherwise would. Watch for the warning signs and seek a physician's opinion if any of them occur.

