

Back pain results from many factors

By CLAY WILLIAMS
N.C. Academy of Family Physicians

It seems as if the complaint is heard from just about everybody at one time or another -- "I've got a 'catch' in my back."

Many times the "catch" back sufferers are referring to is in the lumbar region of the spine -- the lower, slightly curved-in part of the back that catches the brunt of the flexion, extension and rotation that part of our anatomy is routinely subject to. Aside from headache, low back pain is the ailment physicians see most.

Dr. Russell Salton, a Charlotte family physician, explained that the spine -- the backbone -- is situated between two muscles called the para-vertebral muscles. He said constant or recurrent back pain can lead to deterioration of these spine-supporting muscles -- deterioration that often can be traced to a sedentary lifestyle, overweight, poor posture -- all resulting in a loss of muscle tone and a weakening of the lower back.

The family physician added that low back pain can also be caused by other things, such as degenerative arthritis and disk disease.

He pointed out that injury to the lower back is frequently caused

ed by engaging in physical activities by people who are not in shape and don't take time to warm up. He emphasized that those who are not geared to full-blown participation in sports should be careful not to overdo it. He cautioned that one day's play a week or month is not sufficient to condition muscles to vigorous physical activity.

He also listed "position" back strain among people who sit in one position for long periods of time as another cause of low back trouble. Studies have shown that less than 15 percent of cases of low back pain are caused by structural defects such as arthritis, ruptured disks or tumors.

Dr. Salton said the spinal column is made up of 24 separate and nine fused vertebrae, held together by bands of ligaments. At the side of each vertebra, there are little openings through which pass nerve roots. A wrench of the back or lack of muscle strength may cause a "pinching" of a nerve. The sciatic nerve, which extends from the lumbar region into the buttocks, legs and toes, is particularly vulnerable to pressure.

Dr. Salton noted that when the para-vertebral muscles are strained or injured, they may go into spasms. He said this condition is

like a "Charlie horse" in the leg. When spasm occurs, the para-vertebral muscles contract, become rigid and straighten the normally curved lower backbone. This, he asserted, is very painful.

Dr. Salton stressed that many times people complain of low back pain that eventually turns out to be caused by psychological stress. But whether the pain is caused by carrying a sack of potatoes or stress, it is just as real and debilitating. The family physician said that stress-caused back pain is kind of like a tension headache -- in which case, the solution often lies in getting to the root of the stress problem.

Dr. Salton said the best back support comes from the back muscles. Faithful performance of back exercises strengthens muscles in the back and stomach and gives them flexibility. Your physician can explain the different back exercises to you. In many instances, a long-term weight-reduction plan may also be advised. While 90 percent of all back pains go away within a few weeks, precautions should be taken to prevent their recurrence.

(This column is presented as public service by the Chronicle and the N.C. Academy of Family Physicians.)

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Watch bills

Don't let holiday joy turn to despair

By JOANNE FALLS
Home Economics Extension Agent

Too frequently, holiday cheer is transferred into January despair when the bills come in.

This does not have to happen if action is taken in time. Finances can be protected during the holiday season by using a Christmas budget.

Families should bear in mind that:

- Budgeting is a means for controlling shopping expenditures.
- A Christmas budget is a special mini-budget that provides only for Christmas purchases. The Christmas budget is a good way to become familiar with a means for controlling the use of money.

The Christmas budget should be developed before the Christmas shopping begins. Be sure that everyone old enough to voice an opinion is involved, because participation promotes cooperation and commitment, which is necessary for success.

To develop the Christmas budget:

- Decide how much money can be used for holiday purchases from November and December income and from special Christmas savings.
- List all gifts and other holiday purchases that are desired. Look over the list. Label those that are a must as number one and label all other really important ones as number two. If the money is limited, eliminate everything else on the list.

These other things are not important enough to mortgage your 1985 income. Also, you may need to eliminate some of the items you numbered as twos.

- Check the list of gifts and purchases again and star all those things that the family can make or give in services as a gift. For example, you might offer to bake the family's turkey for Christmas as a gift or to babysit for two nights as a Christmas gift.

Now, divide the money available among the list of purchases which are "musts" or very "important."

Be sure to follow the budget and control spending. This involves:

- Spending no more for any item than planned and shopping

wisely and investing less when possible.

- Buying nothing unless planned for.
- Keeping records of expenses, frequently checking progress and eliminating careless habits that waste money.
- Make no bills for holiday spending that must be paid from

1985 income, unless you definitely see your way clear to pay these bills. Always plan for emergency expenses.

The Christmas budget is the key to controlled holiday spending and entering the New Year feeling financially blessed, instead of blue and burdened with holiday debts.

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