

The Survey Says

Surveys say that 70% of Canadian adults report experiencing pain in their shoulders, upper back or lower back during the past two years. That's nearly 3 out of every 4 of us!

So, back pain is common. But, unlike the common cold, common back pain is potentially disabling and a source of significant suffering. It is the second most common reason for people to use our health care services (only respiratory disorders are more frequent). In the 30-50 age group, common back pain takes first place when it comes to causing lost work and lasting disability.

We should be clear on what we mean by "common" back pain because, most certainly, back pain can sometimes be a sign of something much more serious. Fortunately, 90% of back pain is due to functional problems – sprains, strains, joint restrictions, muscle weaknesses and trigger points and, of course, all the 'itises' - bursitis, tendonitis, arthritis. Fewer than 1/10 cases are because of serious disease, tumours, fractures, infections, disc herniations, etc. (Only a health care professional with the title of Doctor -Medicine, Chiropractic, Naturopathy, TCM - has the training and qualifications to provide a clear diagnosis for individual patients ; treatment plans often involve the expertise of various other professional therapists).

Over the years there has been much attention given to classifying back pain as acute (less than 2 weeks), sub-acute (2-6 weeks) or chronic (greater than 6 weeks, or 12 weeks, or 6 months – depending on who you ask). The truth is that for most back pain sufferers the experience plays out over many years with a messy and unpredictable pattern of recurring periods of pain and disability interspersed with sometimes lengthy intervals of relative wellness.

No matter how we might label it - acute or chronic or recurrent, back pain costs us plenty on both a personal and societal level. There's not just the costs of diagnosis and treatment but the cost of lost productivity, lost jobs and lost opportunities .

Back pain is a big, expensive problem and the issue has been made worse by the fact that for a very long time, in medical circles, it has been widely – and falsely- believed that when it comes to common back pain, no matter what you do it will recover on its own with rest and time. Medication can relieve the pain and inflammation and muscle spasms while you wait it out. This myth of the natural remission of common back pain came about from a single study done in one medical practice in the UK in 1973. Recovery was judged on whether or not patients made subsequent appointments with the doctor, not on whether they actually got better.

More recent investigations have revealed that when patients are followed up by researchers, of those who were disabled by pain at the first visit, less than one in five

had fully recovered after one year. And, it turns out that the strongest risk factor for a new episode of back pain is a history of previous episodes of back pain. Prolonged rest (more than a few days) is now known to be harmful , both physically and psychologically. Over-reliance on drugs has created its own problems with abuse and organ damage. International Guidelines on Best Practices for care for back pain , from countries like Denmark, UK and USA , consistently recommend spinal manipulation, exercise and a focus on getting back to the activities of daily living as quickly as possible.

The Environics Research Group have examined the extent to which Canadians experience back pain, the actions they take to relieve their suffering and the levels of satisfaction with their treatment. Their findings indicated a much higher patient satisfaction level for chiropractic care than any other treatment approach. More than 2/3 of people (69%) were “very satisfied” . This compares with less than half “very satisfied” with medical and/or physiotherapy care (43%) or use of prescription drugs (35%).

Canadians are increasingly choosing and preferring chiropractic care for the common complaint of back pain. The chiropractic approach is effective, affordable and safe. Make it your first choice for care and we can help you take better care of yourself.

(Reference: The Chiropractic Report , David Chapman-Smith LL.B. , July 2003)

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