

Low Back Pain - How to beat it.

By Fred Hahn

Lower back pain plagues many athletes in various different sports. It has ended the careers of many famous athletes in an untimely and embarrassing manner. Most of the rehabilitative techniques found in almost all of the clinics today focus on passive modalities, e.g., ultrasound, e-stim, traction, stretching, etc., designed to relieve symptoms of pain and discomfort. While passive modalities can help ease low back pain, few clinicians approach the problem by focusing on active strengthening exercises which promote and foster positive and permanent muscle tissue remodeling of the muscles that extend and rotate the lumbar spine. Positive tissue remodeling should be the primary focus of all low back pain rehabilitation as well as most other physical debilities.

Recently I've been chided by a few readers of WBM for not giving an exacting physiological explanation of some of the concepts I've presented in earlier issues. Let it be known I only get approximately 500-700 hundred words per article so all of you medical technophiles please cut me some slack on the following, OK? Thanks.

Weak muscles in the lumbar area are the cause of most low back pain. And, believe it or not, almost all athletes possess low back muscles that are in a state of near disuse atrophy. When muscles weaken to a given point, the vertebra sink causing compression on the nerves which innervate the area. The result: Pain -- sometimes minor, sometimes quite severe. Specific exercises which strengthen the lumbar extensors, rotators and to a much lesser degree the spinal flexors (abdominals) are scientifically shown to greatly reduce and even eliminate low back pain within a few months of a one session per week rehab program. Sound iffy? Well, The University of Florida Center for Exercise Science has a multitude of studies indicating such. There are hundreds of clinics all over the world using these techniques.

It appears that the stronger the muscles of the spine become, the less chance there is of vertebral compression, hence pain in the involved area. Stronger spinal extensors and rotators keep the spine from "going out" when involved in high force activities such as, well, all sports.

Now, when I say specific lumbar strengthening exercises I'm not talking about reverse crunches, or hyperextensions (Factoid: Did you know that hyperextension of the spine is almost impossible?) or hamstring or buttock exercises. I mean specific exercises using specific machines that are designed to stabilize the pelvis so that the muscles that extend and rotate the lumbar spine are free to contract throughout a full range of motion without the aid of the powerful hip extensors (glutes, hamstrings). Very few clinicians understand the need for such pelvic stabilization and so very few clinics possess these devices. As a baseball player, it pains me that Don Mattingly "Donnie baseball" never was offered access to such incredible machines. Had he been given the opportunity, his career would have lasted quite a few years longer.



The phrase “A carpenter is only as good as his tools” aptly applies to the strengthening and thus rehabilitation of the lower back. For example, unless the proper tool for a given job is used, it is almost impossible to succeed at the task. You can’t build a skyscraper with a hammer and nails. You cannot strengthen the lumbar extensors or rotators unless you possess a tool which can remove pelvic movement allowing for active spinal extension or rotation which increases vertebral space both temporarily (active traction) and permanently. At present, only the MedX Corporation makes such a device. If any coaches or teams are interested in contacting me about these devices and techniques, please do so. I have years of experience using these machines and know top-notch individuals that will sing the praises of these devices.

I advise - no - I demand that all clinicians interested in helping their athletes reduce or eliminate their lower back pain (and to prevent it from occurring down the road in asymptomatic athletes) to seek out these devices and utilize them. There is one caveat however - use a slower repetition cadence than the recommended 2 up, 4 down repetition count. A 10/10 repetition cadence is much less forceful, therefore safer, easier to detect pain in certain ranges of motion and loads the muscles more evenly making for a more “balanced” strength development.

As the saying goes “Use it or lose it.” Loss of strength in the low back muscles can be a sure-fire road to back pain, leading to skill degradation and eventually the premature end to a sports career. Don’t let this come to pass when the tools are out there to keep this from happening to you.

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