

## Spine chillers

Mind Your Body, The Straits Times (Thursday, 9 October 2008)

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By June Cheong

Factors such as lifestyle and the kind of sport you take up can have painful repercussions in your back. So, are you making your spine work harder than it should?

Back pain will afflict more than 80 per cent of people throughout their lives.

The condition isn't just confined to the elderly or the frail.

Take the case of 22-year-old William Wu Mi. The Singapore Dance Theatre dancer suffered immense back pain three years ago when he pulled a tendon on his lower right back.

Mr Wu said: 'It got more serious by the day and I was in a lot of pain by the third week.'

He had physiotherapy and, on the advice of the physiotherapist, did light stretches and Pilates to strengthen his back muscles. He recovered within a month and now does daily exercises to strengthen his back and abdominal muscles.

Back pain can be acute or chronic, which is when the pain lasts for more than three months. It can be punctuated by episodes of acute pain.

Dr Gamaliel Tan, a consultant at the orthopaedic surgery department at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, listed five causal groups for back pain: wear and tear, trauma, infection, cancer and inflammation.

Associate Professor Hee Hwan Tak, senior consultant at the University Spine Centre at National University Hospital, said that annular tears, or disc tears, and degeneration of the spine due to ageing are the most common causes. One example of the latter is spinal stenosis - a narrowing of the spinal canal - which occurs more commonly in those over 50.

Younger patients may encounter slipped discs due usually to accidents. Patients above 50 years old often have problems with disc degeneration.

Lifestyle factors like a sedentary lifestyle, bad posture, smoking and obesity can also contribute to back pain.

Dr Hee said: 'Smoking has been shown to speed up the degeneration of the spinal discs as nicotine disrupts blood supply to the discs and impairs healing.'

'And if you're overweight, your spine has to work harder.'

The part of your back that aches can also be determined by the type of work you do.

Dr Luke Ho from the Elder Chiropractic Clinic attributed upper back and neck pain to poor sitting posture.

He said: 'Many teenagers and office executives who spend many hours in front of the computer have a tendency to stick their heads forward to view the screen.'

Dr Razmi Rahmat, a spine and orthopaedic consultant surgeon at the Centre for Spine and Orthopaedic Surgery, added that office workers often sit for long stretches in a certain position. The ligaments, joints, muscles and tendons tend to fatigue if they are maintained in a particular position for 45 minutes.

Work that involves bending, lifting and prolonged sitting or standing, such as construction work or driving, can lead to middle and lower back pain.

Dr Serene Ng, chiropractor at Integrative Chiropractic said that activities like driving for long hours on bumpy roads, carrying toddlers on one hip, heavy lifting or using vibrating equipment like drills can cause pain in the lower back.

Engaging in strenuous or contact sports like rugby can also lead to back pain.

Dr Hee said: 'You need to run, dash through corners and twist your torso in sports like rugby. Twisting is the leading cause of prolapsed discs and bending increases pressure on your spine.'

He added that bending exerts more than twice the pressure on the spine compared to merely standing.

Beyond the physical pain - which runs the gamut from piercing stabs to dull, long-lasting soreness - chronic back problems can depress one's spirits.

Dr Ho said: 'Pain gnaws away at the individual. It can get so bad that even daily routines like getting dressed or getting in and out of vehicles are affected.'

'When it hurts to do even the simplest of things, one can get very depressed and discouraged.'

Given the extensive catalogue of ailments which could plague one's back, there are many treatment options.

Dr Fong Shee Yan, a consultant at the orthopaedic surgery department at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, advised starting with conservative external treatment like medication and physical therapy before progressing to more invasive types of treatment like spinal injections and open surgery.

Asked if alternative therapies like tui na, massage or acupuncture can relieve back pain, doctors Mind Your Body spoke to said they can relieve muscle tension, reduce muscle spasm and stiffness and improve neck and back movements.

However, prevention is still better than cure and every mother is right to nag her child to stand or sit up straight.

Senior physiotherapist Joseph Ye, from the musculoskeletal physiotherapy clinic in the department of rehabilitative services at Changi General Hospital, advised against prolonged sitting in a slouched position.

Dos include simple stretching exercises every hour if you stay in one position, keeping your back straight when lifting heavy objects, doing warm-ups before vigorous sports activities and seeking treatment for acute back pain immediately.

Dr Hee summed up: 'Once you run into back problems, there's a limit to what doctors can do. The fact that there are so many treatment options means there's no cure for it.'

**4 in 5** people suffer from back pain throughout their lives