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TAKING CHARGE OF BACK PAIN

HOW REGULAR EXERCISE,
TREATMENTS CAN MANAGE
DEBILITATING PAIN

by Michelle Moon Reinhardt
Photography by Barton Wilder Custom Images

There's no doubt about it, Arturo Artaza's job is hard on his back. As director of student relations for an international studies company, he travels frequently, spending days at a time sitting on airplanes, in meetings and at his computer. He lifts heavy bags filled with training materials in and out of rental cars. This prolonged sitting and lifting has resulted in nagging aches and pains in his lower back.

The pain was never severe, he says, until this January. On a trip with friends, he was snowboarding and fell hard on his back—really hard. "There was a dent in my helmet and it felt like my eyes were going to pop out of my head," says Artaza. But Artaza continued to snowboard, he says, making nine more runs down the mountain, and falling two to three times on each run. "I was pretty aggressive. My back hurt, but I didn't think I had really injured it," he says.

Artaza continued to push on, ignoring the pain. Over the next few weeks, he made several cross-country trips, sitting through delays and long flights. "The longer I sat, the more pain I felt," he says. Artaza sought help when he realized his left hip was protruding unnaturally, even when he was standing up straight. "It was like my spine was permanently twisted," he says. "I was in so much pain I couldn't pick up my nine-month-old son, or give my three-year-old daughter piggyback rides. I was desperate."



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Artaza found relief in the hands of Eric Krebs, DC. Over twelve to fifteen visits in two months, the chiropractor used manual adjustments to reposition Artaza's spine. He prescribed exercise and massage care to rehabilitate the damage Artaza had done to his back.

"I was very apprehensive about chiropractic care," Artaza says, noting that he sought out Krebs based on a trusted friend's opinion. "I was in so much pain I was willing to do anything. My only other option was to go to a traditional doctor who would put me under the knife or shoot me full of drugs."

Eight out of ten people will have back pain at some time in their lives, and the risk climbs as you age. Low back pain is second most common reason people visit their doctor. According to the federal government's National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, age, job type and weight all contribute to whether you may suffer back pain.

Nearly seventy percent of these aches and pains are caused not by structural abnormalities but by normal stress and strain on the back. These soft tissue injuries rarely respond well to surgical intervention. Krebs—and others—say, the better we care for our back, the better it will perform.



Allan Besselink, an Austin-based physical therapist, treats Walt Shelton

Krebs says he uses a combination of diagnostic x-rays, patient history and physical examination to build an understanding of the problems his patients are having. Krebs says his treatments have four components: relief of pain, correction of any spinal misalignment, self-care that includes stretching and stabilizing exercises, and maintenance visits which continue to keep the spine aligned.

"Our biggest goal is to get patients safely out of pain as soon as possible. I am looking for a change. If I don't see that I'm helping a patient within two to three visits, I will refer them to a traditional doctor for further testing," says Krebs.

Krebs is certified to treat pediatric patients, but often treats entire families. He discovered chiropractic treatments at thirteen, when he too, suffered from back pain. "I was playing baseball and I overextended my back," says Krebs. The pain was so intense, it sidelined Krebs from the sport he loved. After four to six visits to the chiropractor, he was back playing baseball. "I understand firsthand how much relief good chiropractic care can deliver," he says.

Krebs sessions range from forty to eighty dollars and may be covered by private insurance.

MCKENZIE METHOD

One of the most frustrating things about back pain is that, for many people, there's no guarantee which treatment will be successful. Or, if certain treatments do work, they may stop being effective over time—as Austin environmental attorney and professor Walt Shelton knows all too well.

Shelton has been dogged with sciatic pain for more than a decade. The pain in his lower back and numbness that radiated down his left leg surfaced when his mother fell ill with cancer nearly twelve years ago. Long car trips to East Texas to care for his mother left him nearly immobilized. "I literally had to lift my leg out of the car and onto the pavement," he says. Back then, chiropractic and massage treatments had been effective in resolving his pain.

However, when his father was diagnosed with cancer this spring, the sciatica came roaring back with a vengeance. "I am convinced that my terrible sciatic pain is directly related to episodes of stress in my life," says Shelton. This time, though, when he turned to a chiropractor for treatment, he found his pain only worsened.

"It was terrible. I thought the chiropractor would do the trick, but after the treatment, I could barely walk to the car," he says.

Shelton, who is an avid runner, says he discovered a solution on the Town Lake trail. "I saw a guy running a lot and mentioned my back problems to him. He referred me to a

RESOURCES

Allan Besselink is a physical therapist with more than nineteen years experience who holds the highest certification in the practice of the McKenzie Method. Besselink offices at Performance Wellness, located at 6500 N. MoPac Expressway, Building 3, Suite 3101, telephone 512-491-7772. You can reach Besselink at ab@smartsport.info or by telephone at 512-914-0871. More information about Besselink's practice and training services are found at www.smartsport.info.

Alternative Choice Family Chiropractic—Eric Krebs, DC, has more than one hundred eighty hours of specialized training in pediatric chiropractic care. His office is located at 3532 Bee Caves Road, Suite 102, telephone 512-328-5439. For more information visit www.chiropractic4kidz.com or contact Krebs at drkrebs@chiropractic4kidz.com.

Gioconda Yoga—Gioconda Parker is the director of yoga teacher training program at Castle Hill Fitness. She is an E-RYT 500 Yoga Alliance Registered Teacher with eleven years experience. You can find out more about Gioconda's practice at www.giocondayoga.com or e-mail her at gioconda@giocondayoga.com. Castle Hill Fitness is located at 1112-B N. Lamar Blvd., telephone 512-478-4567 or www.castlehillfitness.com.

CHIROPRACTIC THERAPY

More people are joining Artaza in seeking chiropractic care. According to a 2003 article in *Spine* magazine, an international journal for the study of the spine, Americans made nearly one hundred ninety-two million visits a year to chiropractors, with eighty-eight million of those visits for back or neck pain. That number is expected to grow twenty percent in the next ten years.

"We deal with the spine," says Krebs, "but we also treat every joint in the body." Krebs says his patients come to him for back pain due to two kinds of traumas: macro-traumas, caused by slips or falls, and micro-traumas, caused by poor posture. "One common problem with men is sitting on their wallets," says Krebs. "They don't understand that it causes the hips to be misaligned, and the spine has to compensate—resulting in low back pain."



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Eric Krebs, DC, treats Arturo Artaza.

physical therapist (who specialized in the McKenzie Method)," says Shelton. "It was really the last resort for me. Because I had never seen a physical therapist, it didn't occur to me to seek one out for my problem."

Allan Besselink, an Austin-based physical therapist who holds a diploma in the McKenzie Method of Mechanical Diagnosis and Therapy, treated Shelton and many others for chronic back pain. The McKenzie Method was developed by Robin McKenzie in the nineteen-fifties in New Zealand and is now practiced by physical therapists, chiropractors and physicians. The method is rooted in the idea that repeated

movements, exercises and postures can correct chronic back pain. McKenzie has also published inexpensive self-help books on the subject, including, *Treat Your Own Back* and *Treat Your Own Neck*.

For instance, Besselink prescribed a series of cobra stretches for Shelton's sciatic pain, among other exercises. (A cobra stretch is where the patient lays stomach down and, keeping the hips on the floor, pushes up their upper body, arching the back.) Shelton says doing this stretch multiple times every hour dramatically reduced his pain, almost immediately.

"Sitting increases the pressure, regardless of position. That being the case, a good sitting position is important to diminish those stresses. Increased pressure can lead to pain, but not always," says Besselink. "Most people would do best to get up and walk every hour when they are at the office." Besselink also says a log-shaped lumbar pillow (the Original McKenzie Lumbar Roll is about twelve inches long and four inches in diameter) placed between the small of the back and the chair can help people maintain proper posture when sitting.

"Most of the low back pain I see are generalized aches and pains that traditional medicine cannot address," says Besselink, who is affiliated with Performance Wellness and Smart Sport International. "In my experience, it's not the activity that will generally cause this kind of pain, it's the inactivity that does. But what do we do when we have back pain? We stop moving, which is perhaps the worst thing we can do. We are made to move."

So, Besselink gets his clients moving. During an initial assessment, he evaluates their movements and positions performing their everyday tasks, whether they involve sitting at a

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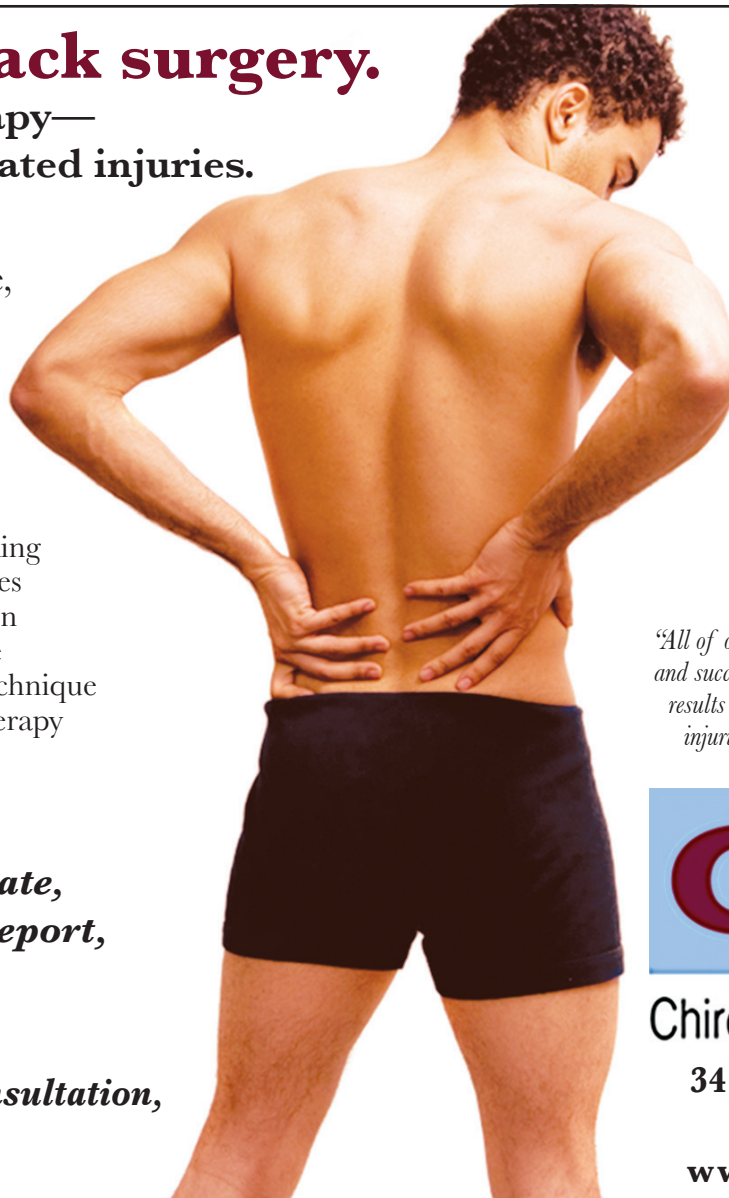
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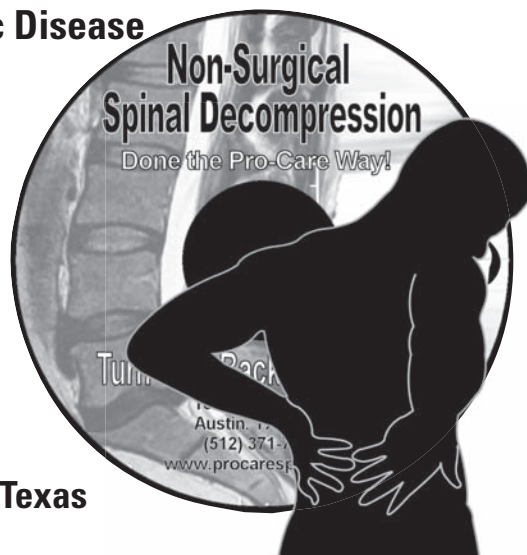
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computer or running several miles. During the assessment, problems are identified and an individual exercises are prescribed. "The McKenzie Method is self-care oriented. It's up to the patient to complete the exercises. The ability to get better is in the patient's hands," he says.

Besselink expects to see progress in his patients within the first three visits, or he will refer them to a specialist for further evaluation. His sessions cost seventy-five dollars for a full hour, or forty for a half-hour follow up.

YOGA

For more than three thousand years, people have believed in the healing power of yoga, and many use it to successfully treat and prevent back pain.

Gioconda Parker, a certified yoga teacher with more than five hundred hours of training, teaches Vinyasa Yoga at Castle Hill Fitness on North Lamar. She says several of her clients have sought out yoga because of nagging low back pain. In some cases, she will schedule a private session with a client to create a custom program. For other clients, she recommends modifications of her existing classes.

"Chronic back pain is the result of lifestyle," says Parker. "Most of us sit a lot. This makes our core muscles weak and our hamstrings tight," she adds, referring to the three hamstring muscles in the back of the upper legs. Parker says the best way to prevent or treat these pains is to focus on strengthening and stretching those areas.

She recommends four exercises anyone can do at home:

Modified forward bend—Just bend over and attempt to touch your toes.

Downward-facing dog—This is a yoga pos-


ture that involves placing both hands and both feet on the floor and holding your hips high in the air to form a triangle.

Table top—Stand three feet away from a chair (or exercise ball). Facing the chair, bend at the waist until your arms stretch and touch the seat of the chair. The further away from the chair, the more intense the stretch.

Doorway stretch—Lay down next to an interior door. With your bottom against the baseboard, place one leg parallel to the door jam, and allow the other leg to drop through the doorway.

"Sometimes back pain is feeling like it's your job to support everyone. Men in society do feel that pressure," says Parker. "That stress manifests in our bodies. The physical aspect of yoga can serve to strengthen and stretch. The other part of yoga is to be present in the breath of the body and to allow yourself to be present, rather than stuck in what happened today. There's no way that state of mind doesn't affect the body."

Arturo Artaza has definitely had a change of mind. Since his injury, caring for his back has become a priority, which means he's committed to a regular exercise program and has promised to throttle back on the intensity. "Will I go snowboarding again? Definitely. Will I be less aggressive? Yes. I'm more in tune with my body and I'm not going to ignore pain anymore," he says.

Good advice that may help keep his back in shape for snowboarding next winter. 

Michelle Moon Reinhardt lives down the street from Arturo Artaza, but won't be joining him on the slopes. You may e-mail Michelle at mreinhardt@goodlifemag.com.

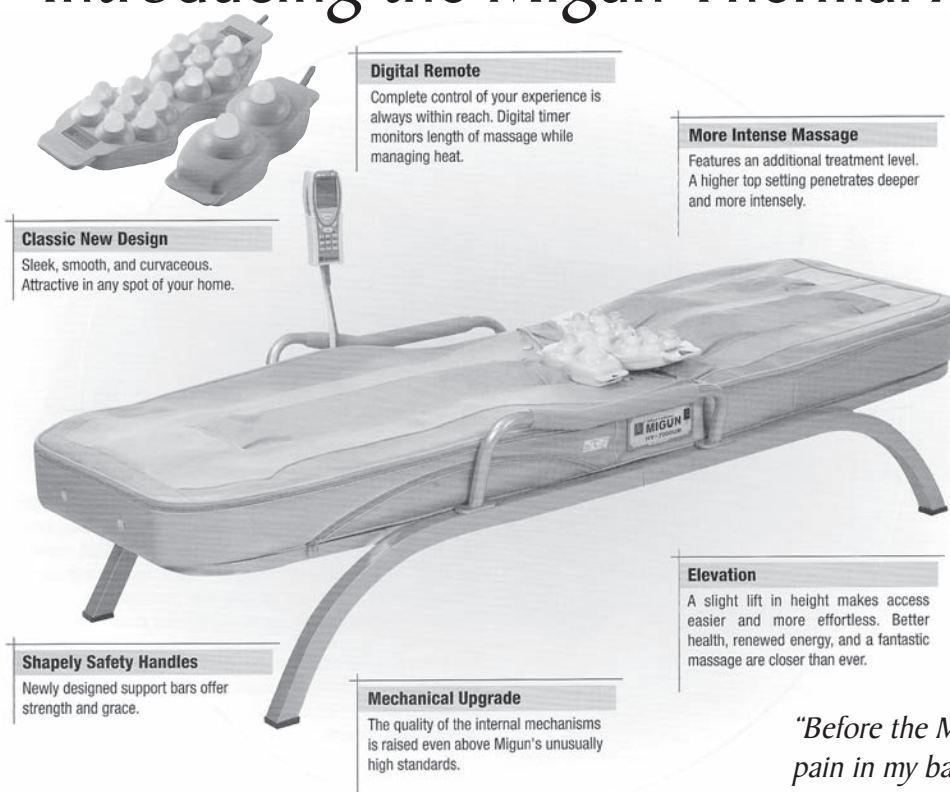
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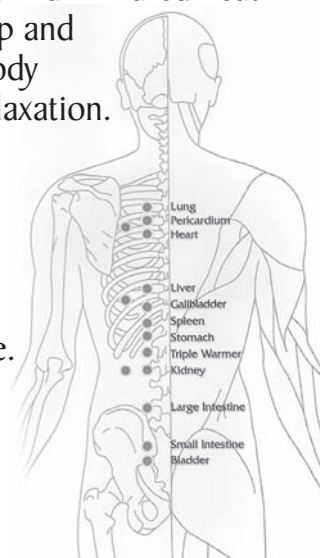


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