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Do you also, literally, carry the world on your back?

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Back on fire

While you may be blaming your sedentary lifestyle for backache, the real cause may well be stress

Kiran Yadav

IF you have ever suffered a backache (chances are that you probably have if you are on the wrong side of 30) you'd know that there comes a point when your back just gives up on you. The body proclaims a sentence for 'having taken it for granted'.

Incidentally, backache is one of the most widespread medical complaints today. And diagnosing it is often impossible. It's difficult to identify a specific cause in up to 80% of the people with back pain. "The majority of back pain is due to mechanical causes, ie weakness of the muscles or ligaments. There is no test which can diagnose the weakness or strain of muscles or ligaments. Hence in most of the cases of back pain, the cause cannot be identified by tests," says Dr HS Chhabra, Chief of Spine Service & Medical Director, Indian Spinal Injuries Center, Delhi.

"Most people rightly blame their sedentary lifestyle, but not many know that even work-related stress can lead to backache," says Dr Harshvardhan Hegde, Consultant and Head of the Department, Orthopedics and Spine Surgery, Artemis Health Institute, Gurgaon. It's not only the mind which suffers from emotional strain, but also the body. Ever observed how a stressed person sits — with his muscles tense, shoulders drooping and with an unmistakable slouch over the desk. Needless to add that it has a direct bearing on the muscles, joints and ligaments. Pain specialists have also begun to account for emotional stresses in their attempt to approach the subject holistically. "Up to 30% of cases of back pain become chronic. In other words it lasts more than three months. For any chronic pain emotional or psychosomatic factors come into play. The stress reduces the threshold to withstand pain and sometimes also becomes the major factor perpetuating the pain," adds Chhabra.



IT IS TIME TO CONSULT YOUR DOCTOR WHEN...

- You seem to be losing control over your bladder and bowel. Or if you experience 'pins' and 'needles' in your legs.
- Your leg or feet feels weak and you experience difficulty in walking
- You have pain in your back that also radiates down the leg with numbness or loss of feeling in your leg.
- Your pain lasts longer than three or four days. This may mean that the problem is of a more serious kind.
- Your pain results from a fall or blow to your back.

Source: Reversing Back Pain by Dr Yash Agarwal and Dr AP Singh

"You shouldn't take it easy. Life can be seriously compromised because of back pain. I have seen cases where it has led to paralysis," he further adds. Studies show that 25% to 50% of people with herniated discs have no back discomfort at all, while degeneration of lumbar discs is found in 25% to 70% of people without symptoms of back pain. "90% of the people suffer from backache at some point in their lives. However, the incidence has gone up by 25-30% in the last four years," says Dr Sanjay Sarup. Sarup, an orthopedic surgeon at Max Healthcare is often invited to deliver lectures to corporate houses on effective ergonomics regularly.

Meanwhile, research on pain management remains inconclusive. The latest is that lower-back supports may not be of much help in preventing or managing back pain. The research

review published in the Cochrane Library, a publication of the Cochrane Collaboration, an international organisation that evaluates medical research suggests that proper lifting technique is just as good.

"Try to work 15 minutes of exercise into your daily routine, and strengthen the muscles of your lower back and abdomen — they support and protect your spine," suggest Dr Yatish Agarwal and Dr AP Singh.

Another easy way of battling the epidemic of backache and getting back on your toes is to meditate regularly, say Agarwal and Singh. "It helps in slowing the brain waves, decreasing muscle tension and the heart rate. It also can lessen your body's response to the chemical it produces when you are stressed by pain."

Just a few clues to tell your body that you are not taking it for granted.