

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Clark R. Mills

## Alleviating Work-Related Back Pain

*Dr. Mills knows that work-related back pain is a global epidemic. In fact, back pain continues to be the leading overall cause of physical dysfunction and lost productivity in the workplace (J Manipulative Physiol Ther 2005;28:128-34).*



Work-related musculoskeletal disorders, including back pain, have accounted for “a significant proportion of work injuries and workers’ compensation claims in industrialized nations since the late 1980s.” (*Brain Behav Immun* 2006;20:423-9.)

Cost estimates related to low-back pain (LBP) exceed \$50 billion. These estimates, cited extensively in numerous studies, include both direct health-care costs and costs resulting from disability payments and lost productivity (*Occup Environ Med* 2002;59:807-15).

Dr. Mills believes the need for injury-prevention education and promotion of drug-free therapeutic alternatives — such as chiropractic care — is more crucial than ever.

### The Problem With Pain Medications

Along with the rise in work-related back pain has come an explosive proliferation of highly addictive medications. For instance, investigators note that the prescription of opioids for musculoskeletal pain “has increased

substantially in recent years” — particularly for work-related back pain (*J Pain* 2006;7:718-25).

Opioids include morphine, methadone, codeine and oxycodone. Common side effects include drowsiness, nausea and restricted breathing.

Even seemingly benign over-the-counter medications suggested for back pain, such as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), are riddled with side effects, including stomach ulcers, heartburn, headache, dizziness, ringing in the ears, allergic reactions, liver disease and kidney problems.

Dr. Mills is opposed to the indiscriminate use of pain medication. Drugs serve only to mask pain — not eradicate it. Chiropractic care, on the other hand, addresses the source of discomfort: not merely its symptoms.

The following information will help you identify work-related instigators of back pain and highlight how Dr. Mills and chiropractic care can help.

### Lifting Laments

Continual lifting, especially if the loads are heavy or the lifting position is awkward, can spark work-related back pain and misalign spinal bones (vertebrae). This common condition, known as *vertebral subluxation*, also occurs when spinal movement is restricted.

Dr. Mills corrects vertebral subluxa-



tions with safe and gentle maneuvers called *chiropractic adjustments*.

Numerous studies highlight the effectiveness of chiropractic adjustments for work-related as well as non-work-related back pain. Chiropractic adjustments are particularly therapeutic for those with intense back pain: even when the sciatic nerve or herniated discs are involved (*Spine* 2006;6:131-37).

Even the Canadian Armed Forces acknowledge the benefits of chiropractic care for LBP. In a survey of 102 military personnel, “The majority of military personnel (94.2 percent) and referring physicians (80 percent) expressed satisfaction with chiropractic services.” (*Mil Med* 2006;171:572-6.)

### Sitting Sorrows

Are individuals who spend the majority of their work days seated — as opposed to being physically active — less likely to develop back pain? “No,” according to researchers.

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In a study of 109 women between the ages of 45 and 62, half were nurses (physical work) and half were administrators (seated work). Amazingly, researchers discovered no difference in the rate of disc degeneration, disc herniation or presence of osteoarthritis. “Patterns of lumbar disc degeneration are not associated with the job type and characteristic physical loadings.” (*Spine* 2006;31:2701-6.)

However, both types of work may spark back problems, say scholars.

### Posture Problems

Sitting at your desk for long periods of time may impress the boss and temporarily increase your productivity level. But studies show the longer you sit, the higher your risk of developing back pain.

Ergonomics — the design science that maximizes productivity by reducing fatigue and discomfort — can make a big difference. Companies that purchase ergonomically correct chairs can substantially reduce employee work-related back pain.

But ergonomically correct seating is just half of the healthy back equation. *How* you sit is just as important. For instance, those who favor slumping in their seats — such as students — up their back-pain risk even more (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2006;29:213).

To achieve optimal seating posture, researchers suggest keeping your back and shoulders straight, with your bottom touching the back of the chair. Additional tips include the following:

- Distribute your body weight evenly on both hips.
- Keep knees even with, or slightly higher than, your hips (use a foot rest if necessary).
- When sitting in a chair that rolls and pivots, don’t twist at the waist while sitting. Instead, turn your whole body.
- Keep feet flat on the floor or on a foot stool.
- If possible, sit at a 135-degree reclined position.

- Step away from your desk every 20 minutes for a brief walk and stretch.

### Teen Trouble

Research shows that teens experience a disproportionately higher rate of work-related back and other injuries. Reasons include working long and late hours, inadequate safety training and lack of communication with co-workers and supervisors (*Am J Health Behav* 2006;30:525-32).

Undiagnosed injuries sustained in teenage years can result in a lifetime of pain and agony if not properly addressed. That’s why it is crucial that people of all ages receive regular chiropractic checkups.

### Stress Strains

In a study of 368 soldiers, higher levels of job stress were directly related to higher levels of general distress. The result? A higher frequency of doctor visits for low-back pain. Researchers concluded that reducing work-related stress “should prove useful in the management of acute low-back pain.” (*J Occup Environ Med* 2006;48:607-14.)

### Small Business Not a Solution

Those who work for small-scale manufacturers are just as vulnerable to back and other injuries as those who toil away at large-scale facilities, according to Japanese researchers who pooled data on 1,298 workers from 228 small-scale manufacturing enterprises (*J Occup Health* 2006;48:366-76).

The good news? The same researchers note that employers can help reduce or eliminate injuries by providing their workforce with health education and job safety training. These recommendations fit perfectly with the **chiropractic lifestyle**, a philosophy that promotes the prevention of illness, disease and injury through healthy living and regularly scheduled chiropractic care.

### Positive Change Forecasted

Doctors of chiropractic are encouraged by the recent global emphasis on preventing work-related back pain. Recent breakthroughs in Europe “support combining traditional work design methods used in manufacturing companies with ergonomics methods. New ergonomics standards provide for interaction between job and machinery designers and ergonomists in the design of work processes and workplaces.” (*Appl Ergon* 2006;37:441-50.)

### Follow Doctor’s Orders

Every injury — every person — heals differently. That’s why it’s important to follow your doctor’s orders, even if your symptoms have vanished. That’s because “a substantial proportion of patients with work-related back pain experience injury-related absences following their first return to work.” (*J Occup Rehabil* 2006;16:303-23.)

These relapses are bad not only for patients, but also for employers. An analysis of workers’ compensation claims for nonspecific, low-back injuries finds that “recurrent occurrences cost far more than do claims for initial episodes. These findings suggest that more effort be made to avoid relapses through preventive care.” (*Spine* 2006;31:219-25.)

### Take Action

Don’t wait until work-related back pain strikes to schedule a chiropractic evaluation. Because, when it comes to back pain, prevention is key. Also, ask us about the on-the-job seminars and prevention programs we offer to community businesses.

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