

In our first piece, we talked about what can give you the best chance of overcoming your back problems. Namely, seeing a physical therapist who uses treatments supported by research. In summary, this includes an active approach, using a combination of manual therapy techniques, possibly spinal decompression, specific exercises according to your needs, and working with you to help you incorporate some lifestyle changes that can not only help with your back pain, but also your overall health and fitness. A passive approach, which uses treatments to control symptoms like heat/ice, ultrasound, electrical stimulation, etc. has been shown to have very little effect on helping reduce pain or improve function. They feel great while they're applied, but offer no long-term effects. I believe most of you have learned this by experience.

So, we briefly covered what can help you if you have a problem. But, what can *you do* to prevent recurrences or avoid back/neck problems all together?

We know through research and practical experience *that those who exercise regularly at an appropriate intensity have a significantly lower incidence of back pain.* Why is this? We've learned that our bodies are continuously adapting throughout the entire lifespan to stresses placed upon it. This is called Wolff's Law, and was developed by Julius Wolff back in the 19th century. His law applies to bone strength and structure, but similar concepts apply to muscle as well. For example, we know that in those who regularly perform strengthening exercises, their bones become more dense, thicker, and stronger. We also

know that their muscles become stronger, which allows them to give more support and lessen stress on joints. Now, as our muscles and joints become stronger, everyday activities become easier, because we can do more work and are more physically capable of withstanding the strains of everyday life. Therefore, our chances of developing a back problem are less. (This assumes, of course, that we are also mindful of using proper posture and lifting mechanics throughout our day as much as possible. This will be a future topic we'll discuss.)

In contrast, we know that *inactivity is our enemy.* As we age, we lose muscle and bone mass anyway. It is an unfortunate, natural occurrence of aging. We know, again through research, that if we are inactive, our bones become even thinner, more brittle, and our muscles become smaller and weaker (this is called atrophy). This is an example of Wolff's Law again – if less stress or no stress is placed on our body, it adapts....by becoming weaker and smaller. Why? - because if we're not doing much, it doesn't need to do much. Therefore, things that we think should be easy (lifting, laundry, cleaning, even just walking) all of a sudden are more difficult. Maybe we can't even do them at all anymore. This is how function, and ultimately independence, are lost. This process cannot be stopped, *BUT - it can be slowed significantly. How? You guessed it – through exercise.*

So *we have a choice* – exercise regularly and improve or maintain our fitness and independence, or don't exercise and lose it faster as we age. Yes, some people do have the advantage of having good genes which allow them to do less than others and still

maintain a fair amount of independence. But everyone can benefit from regular exercise, without a doubt.

There is a saying – *“You get back what you put into it.”* Meaning, your back (and your overall health) will be only as good as the effort you put into taking care of yourself. In a January 2009 article in the Journal of Family Medicine, the effectiveness of many different treatments for back pain were reviewed. The study found that even with the advances in the use of surgeries, injections, and medications, they are not all that effective, and many people continue to suffer from back problems. Surgery, injections, and medications, are proving not to be the answer for most cases of back pain. The author, Richard Deyo, MD, concluded that *“there is no magic bullet”*. He continued to say that back pain is *“a problem that can be seldom cured, but must be managed, and that patients need to be given realistic expectations despite product marketing and medical rhetoric promising a pain-free life”*.

The recommendation by Dr. Deyo is that in most cases, *the best approach is to promote conservative care, exercise, and involve the patient/client in their care.*

Many researchers are coming to similar conclusions – an active approach to back pain is best. Our physical therapists and staff, working together with you, give you the best chance of overcoming your back and other muscle/joint problems. In addition to possessing advanced skills in evaluation and manual therapy, our experienced physical therapists can determine what type of exercise is best for you, and help get you back to doing what you love to do.

Remember, you have a **CHOICE** in who you see for your physical therapy needs. We invite you to choose Hershey Orthopedic & Spine Rehabilitation. For more information please call us at **(717)533-7000**, or visit our website at **www.hersheyrehab.com**.