

HEALTH-CARE QUARTERLY

Back pain relief attainable

BY TONYA LAYMAN

Contributing Writer

Whether the cause of back pain stems from a trauma, like a workplace incident or a car accident, or degenerative disease, one thing remains true: There are ways to find relief.

"My advice is anything that lasts more than two weeks should be examined by a



Wing
Chang

physician," said Dr. **Wing Chang** with **Peachtree Orthopaedic Clinic**.

Chang often sees younger men who present with back pain caused by some sort of injury while his older patients are usually suffering from degenerative disc disease.

"Those younger guys may have a torn or protruding disc that can result in a pinched nerve, but as folks get older their back pain is more degenerative in nature versus injury driven," Chang said. "That is when the back becomes weaker and is not able to take as much punishment or loads, making it prone to injury."

In advanced cases, the older men may have central canal stenosis, the narrowing of the spinal canal, or foraminal stenosis,

the narrowing of the cervical disc space caused by enlargement of a joint in the spinal canal.

Rather than just chalking up the pain to getting older, there are some things that can be done to strengthen the back and relieve the pain. Stretching is important, as is working out the back in the right way.

"Your back muscles are active 23 out of 24 hours a day. If you are sitting down, they are active. If you are walking, they are active. Even when you are lying down in certain positions, they remain active. So you don't need to work out those muscles like you do your biceps, quadriceps or thighs. Instead of jerky movements, you want to do more static exercises like planks. Things that build your core help strengthen the back," Chang said.

While back pain actually affects women more often than men, men too often put off that trip to the doctor and the problem can become worse.

"Men don't like to go to the doctor so they will grunt and bear it and hope it works itself out," he said.

Doctors will typically start with conservative care, like physical therapy or medications including anti-inflammatory pills, muscle relaxers or steroids.

"That is usually the first line of treatment for general back pain. Most patients, I'd say about 90 percent, get better with

► CLOSER LOOK

- About 80 percent of adults experience low back pain at some point in their lives. It is the most common cause of job-related disability and a leading contributor to missed work days.
- Low back pain can range in intensity from a dull, constant ache to a sudden, sharp sensation that leaves the person incapacitated. Pain can begin abruptly as a result of an accident or by lifting something heavy, or it can develop over time due to age-related changes of the spine.
- Most low back pain is short term and lasts a few days to a few weeks. It tends to resolve on its own with self-care.
- Subacute low back pain is defined as pain that lasts between four and 12 weeks.
- Chronic back pain is defined as pain that persists for 12 weeks or longer, even after an initial injury or underlying cause of acute low back pain has been treated.
- The magnitude of the burden from low back pain has grown worse in recent years. In 1990, a study ranking the most burdensome conditions in the U.S. in terms of mortality or poor health as a result of disease put low back pain in sixth place; in 2010, low back pain jumped to third place, with only ischemic heart disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease ranking higher.

SOURCE: NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF NEUROLOGICAL DISORDERS AND STROKE

that treatment after a month or two," Chang said. "If that doesn't work, we order an MRI to find the exact problem and proceed with more aggressive treatment, like cortisone injections or surgical intervention."

Abdominal organ problems, pancreatitis, liver disease and an aortic aneurysm are just some of the catastrophic diseases that can present as back pain, Chang said.

Dr. **Oluseun Olufade**, assistant professor of the department of orthopaedic surgery for **Emory Healthcare**, said a

treatment plan will vary from individual to individual with the most basic being a stretching regiment that can increase flexibility and range of motion.

He agrees that a majority of patients who are suffering from a lumbar strain situation will feel relief in about three or four weeks by simply using over-the-counter non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, stretching and allowing the body to rest. "We try to abstain from pain meds especially early on. Those should only be used in the short term when the pain continues," he said.