

Relaxing out of musculoskeletal pain

Musculoskeletal pain and especially that associated with muscle spasm, such as low back pain and neck pain, affects all ages and doctors see it on a daily basis. A study including South Africans showed that, in one year, one out of every three adolescents and half of all adults will suffer from lower back pain.



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Dr Lervasen Pillay is a Johannesburg-based general practitioner with a special interest in sports medicine and musculoskeletal conditions. His work has shown that this is a condition, which almost everybody may find themselves at some point in their lifetime.

"It is so common, but it can have a dramatic effect on a person's lifestyle and ability to be active. Just simple activities, such as getting in and out of bed, washing, driving, or getting in and out of a car or taxi can become extremely painful and difficult.

"Especially if pain is persistent, it interferes with work and becomes a considerable financial burden. It is emotionally draining. People tend to get depressed and anxious, which affects work and time with family and friends. It leaves them feeling useless, which makes managing the original cause of the pain quite complicated and difficult."

Work-related pain

Lower back pain and other musculoskeletal conditions that result in time off work may occur from overexertion, such as lifting or carrying heavy objects, or having to maintain an awkward posture for extended periods. Repetitive movements, such as using a mouse or typing, or activities that require repetitive hand movements, can affect the wrist and less commonly the shoulder and back.

Sport

Dr Pillay sees many patients suffering from spasm and pain after straining a muscle at gym or while playing sport. Repetitive movements, high intensity training, overuse and direct injuries may all result in musculoskeletal pain in various parts of the body. Among South African sports people, musculoskeletal pain was reported by almost two thirds of older

swimmers, 8 out of 10 school boys who play cricket and over 90% of hockey players.

Children and adolescents

"Taking care during activities and ensuring that movements and posture are correct needs to start early because musculoskeletal pain is one of the most common causes of long-standing and recurrent pain in children and adolescents. Importantly, it is frequently caused by correctable, everyday factors, such as posture and computer use. Children who carry heavy school bags suffer from both musculoskeletal pain and problems with posture."

Treatments

The management of musculoskeletal pain usually involves a combination of pain medication, anti-inflammatories, physiotherapy, Biokinetics to assist with strength, balance and fitness.

"The problem is that some people can become dependent on this medication and both analgesics and anti-inflammatories can have significant side effects, so we have to find a treatment option that is appropriate for each individual. It is often very useful to add a muscle relaxant to help relieve muscle spasm, pain and associated pressure on nerves.

"Recently in South Africa, new muscle relaxants have become available. People should be aware of these options, so that they can ask their healthcare provider about a suitable treatment to get them back to their normal activities as soon as possible," he concludes.

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