

Occupational Health Group is a service offered to the business community of North Alabama by Huntsville Hospital and Decatur General Hospital Systems

## Your Aching Back

by Freddy G. McMurry M.D., M.P.H. Associate Medical Director, Occupational Health Group

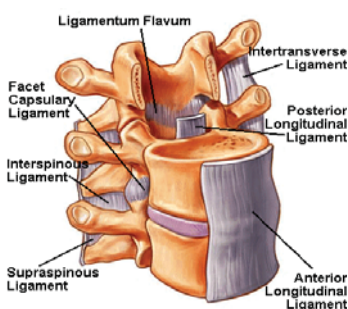


Low back pain is a common condition worldwide and a frequent cause of lost work time in the United States. Back pain is more common between 35 and 55 years of age but can affect any age group. Back pain is uncomfortable but not usually serious. Most cases

heal within a few days to a few weeks. Staying as active as possible promotes healing of your pain.

The back is a mechanical structure and supports the weight of your body plus any extra weight that you are carrying. It is under pressure, especially during bending, twisting and lifting. Pain in your lower back is usually a result of stress to your muscles, tendons, ligaments, or discs. A pinched or irritated nerve can spread pain to your buttocks and thighs which is known as sciatica. The basic mechanical structure of your back includes:

- Vertebrae (bones) that support the weight of your body
- Discs between the bones that cushion and allow the spine to bend
- Ligaments that hold the bones and discs together
- Tendons that connect muscles to the bones
- Nerves that branch off the spinal cord going to the extremities
- Muscles that provide the mechanical force for movement



### RED FLAG SYMPTOMS

Red flag symptoms with back pain may indicate a serious underlying condition so visit your doctor as soon as possible if these apply:

- Fever or weight loss
- Constant back pain that doesn't ease with time
- Pain down the legs and below the knees
- A recent trauma or fall on your back
- Loss of bladder control or inability to pass urine
- Loss of bowel control or numbness around the genitals, buttocks or anus
- Over 55
- Have taken steroids for a few months
- Drug abuser
- Have or have had cancer
- Have a low immune system due to chemotherapy or another medical condition (for example, HIV/AIDS)

### CAUSES

In the vast majority of cases, we're unable to be precise about why people have back pain. You may wake up with back pain and have no idea what has caused it. This can be frustrating. In the majority of cases back pain is a nonspecific mechanical strain due to the way the bones, muscles and ligaments in the back work together. Back pain can be triggered by many everyday activities such as:

- Bending and twisting awkwardly
- Lifting, carrying, pushing or pulling incorrectly
- Standing or bending down for long periods

### DIAGNOSIS

A history of your pain and physical exam are done mainly to exclude serious red flag type conditions. If you have a simple mechanical back strain, tests are not always useful because they typically do not show anything unusual. Tests may be done if your pain lasts for longer than expected, if you have had an injury or blow to your back, or for concern there may be an underlying cause for your pain. X-rays or an MRI scan may be done in order to provide more accurate information about your back. MRI provides the greatest detail but is also very expensive and typically is done to exclude serious disc injury.

A herniated (ruptured) disc can sometimes cause serious back pain. The jelly-like material inside the disc may extrude out and press on the spinal cord or nerve roots, which run next to the disc. In addition to lower back pain, you may also have pain into your buttocks and lower extremities due to nerve irritation. Age tends to dry out and weaken your discs. The discs become less flexible and do not cushion the vertebrae as well. This is a common cause of early morning stiffness and pain we all experience with age.

### TREATMENT

Many cases of low back pain require nothing other than time, over the counter anti-inflammatories and being careful with activity. It is important to remain as physically active as possible. Overly protecting your back can delay healing. Be careful when making painful movements, but the goal is steady return to normal activity as soon as possible. Bed rest may provide some temporary relief but prolonged bed rest will make your pain worse. Walking and stretching help facilitate healing. Typically, a home exercise sheet is provided as a guide. Physical therapy is used in some instances to teach you exercises that will strengthen the muscles and improve your flexibility. While you may not feel any immediate benefit, research has shown that people who continue to work during an episode of back pain recover quicker than people who stay at home. Emphasis on prevention with good posture and good body mechanics plus regular strength and flexibility conditioning helps keep the back ache away.

## OHG Offers Lunch & Learns for 2009

Occupational Health Group is going to offer quarterly "Lunch & Learns". The sessions will be held at the Huntsville Public Library and the Decatur Utilities Building. Lunch will be provided for a fee, but the session is free. We will be beginning the year with a presentation on **Back Safety** in the workplace on February 25th in Huntsville and March 5th in Decatur. Be watching for the announcement, which will come out in April, of the topic for our next Lunch & Learn. The next session is May 27th and 28th, in Huntsville and Decatur respectively. To register for the seminars, please email Wendy Ryan at [wendy063@hgala.org](mailto:wendy063@hgala.org), or call her at 256-922-6675.

## Employee Spotlight: Debbie McCulley Billing Supervisor



Debbie McCulley is the Billing/Patient Accounts Manager for Occupational Health Group. She is also the Stolas Systems Administrator for all the clinics and administration department for their computer support. Debbie has been with OHG since February 1999. She has acquired a great deal of experience working with the Alabama Worker's Compensation Law's, fee schedules and insurance carriers, along with the experience of computer support to all departments within OHG. Debbie strives to exceed the expectations of our customer's with excellence, respect, honesty, flexibility and dedication.

## Top 6 Cold and Flu Busters

by Charlene Learner, R.N., Wellness Coordinator, Occupational Health Group



We are definitely in Cold and Flu Season. People all around are coughing, sneezing, and carrying around tissue as if it was the latest and greatest wardrobe accessory. In order to try to prevent yourself from joining in their misery, there are some simple steps that can be taken to reduce your chances of contracting the Flu or a Cold:

6. **Moderate Exercise.** People who exercise regularly are less likely to get sick. In fact, studies have shown that exercising daily and maintaining a healthy body weight bolsters your immune system and helps your body fight infection.
5. **Drink Water Often.** Downing eight 8-ounce glasses of water should be part of your regular routine every day, but especially during cold and flu season. Water is used by every cell in your body and is essential for flushing out toxins and germs. If water isn't your first choice of beverages find ways to make it more flavorful.
4. **Get Enough Sleep.** If you're sleep-deprived, you're more susceptible to getting sick. Develop an evening routine to help you bed down easier. Turn off all distractions like TV and the computer and avoid caffeine and heavy food well before bedtime.
3. **Eat Well.** A healthy immune system is your best defense against pathogens such as viruses and bacteria. By focusing on nutrient-rich foods, instead of high-calorie, sugary or fatty foods, you can help ward off illness. Choose foods high in antioxidants especially Vitamin A and C.
2. **Get Vaccinated.** If you really want to maximize your odds of avoiding the flu, get vaccinated. Our flu season runs through March so it is not too late for a flu shot...but hurry.
1. **Wash Your Hands. Mom was right!** Proper hand-washing is especially important during cold and flu season. According to a 2007 study by the American Society for Biology, only 77% of men and women wash their hands in public bathrooms. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that hand-washing is the single most important prevention step for reducing disease transmission.

## OHG Directory

Administration.....	(256) 922-6675
Marketing and Business Development .....	(256) 922-6677
Billing Department.....	(256) 922-6673
OHG - Huntsville.....	(256) 265-7000
OHG - Madison.....	(256) 774-7300
OHG - Decatur.....	(256) 353-4325
Wellness Services.....	(256) 922-6699

[www.OHGonline.org](http://www.OHGonline.org)

## Holiday Closings

All OHG clinics will be closed in observance of the following holidays:

Memorial Day	May 25th
Independence Day	July 3rd
Labor Day	September 7th



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