

# Dealing with Back Pain Caused by Disk Rupture, Disk Bulge, Stenosis

## INTRODUCTION

The pain started about five years ago. Excruciating back pain accompanied by equally distressful sciatic pain. I was cautioned not to slow down, to take to bed, to rest because this would not help me get better. I was forlorn. My active life had ended. But I became my own champion and sought out advice, tried things on my own and never gave up, even after sleeping the first summer on a foam mattress on the floor. Today, I lead a reasonably normal and active lifestyle. There are some things that I just cannot do anymore, like lifting that heavy rock in the garden, but for the most part I am okay. I hope that by sharing my experiences that you, too, will become okay.

## EXPECTATIONS

Time heals all wounds, so be patient. The pain **will** go away, faster if you follow my advice and it will **stay away** if you are religious about following the Ongoing Activities (below). However, you must be realistic. You will never be completely free from pain. Your objective is to keep it at bay so that you can live a more or less normal lifestyle. I play golf, work out at the gym and garden with few restrictions.

## SURGERY

Surgery should be a last resort if all else fails. Even at that, surgery can be hit and miss, sometimes relieving symptoms, sometimes making them worse.

## PAIN RELIEF

### Over the Counter Products

#### *Non Steroid Anti Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs)*

Most of your pain comes from inflammation of the nerves that are being pinched between the spinal vertebrae. Alleviating the inflammation reduces pain, but it is not a cure. You can safely use NSAID products such as Advil, Motrin, Tylenol, generic Ibuprofen, Naproxen (Aleve) for a very long time. You should check with your doctor because these can sometimes interact badly with other meds that you may be taking. Even the time at which you take these in combination with other meds may be important. For example, wait at least one hour after you take your daily baby aspirin before taking Ibuprofen. My pain doctor also recommended varying the NSAIDs that I take. For example, I'll take Aleve for a few weeks then switch to Extra Strength Tylenol. Or vary morning and evening.

#### *Creams*

Voltaren is an effective cream for short term relief of pain. It's not a cure-all, but it helps. You must ask the pharmacist for a tube, but no prescription is necessary. I use it mostly to relieve muscle-type pain.

#### *Prescription Drugs*

Lyrica and Neurontin are effective drugs which relieve back pain for many, but usage is sometimes accompanied by nasty side effects. I suggest that you try everything else before resorting to Lyrica.

## Spinal Injections

A spinal injection of steroids mixed with pain killers can provide immediate relief from pain for some, moderate relief for others and no relief for the unfortunate. The procedure is painless and can be repeated up to three times/year if necessary. In my case, a single injection was all that was required for me to get on with my life. It is done on an outpatient basis and it takes no more than 30 minutes. If waiting time for an appointment is an issue and you have the money or health insurance, you can have the procedure done at many private radiology clinics. Ask your pain doctor.

## Heat vs. Cold

Many therapists recommend cold treatment at the onset of the problem. I have always had more success with heat, even on a daily basis. I have found a wonderful back heating “pad” made by Bed Buddy. You can order one on-line from [www.drugstore.com](http://www.drugstore.com). Make sure to follow directions. Pop into microwave for 1 minute, 45 seconds – no more!

## Girdles

There are many girdles on the market that help reduce pain. I have been advised against using a girdle because, in the long run, it will demotivate you from generating your own natural “girdle” that you can rely on whenever and wherever you go. (See below – “Strengthen Core Muscles”).

## THERAPY

### Osteopaths

The one type of therapist that made a huge difference for me and got me back to almost normal was an osteopath. If you have never visited an osteopath, then do not confuse this type of practitioner with a physiotherapist or a chiropractor. In fact, I suggest that you totally stay away from chiropractors. They do not help with this kind of back pain and they can be dangerous. Osteopathy is very gentle and is completely safe and painless. In fact, when I first started “osteo” I thought it was a fraud because it didn’t feel like the therapist was doing anything! I know two very skilled osteos in the Montreal area – feel free to ask me for their coordinates. From time to time I return for a tune up.

### Back Pain Miracle Clinics

You’ve probably seen the newspaper ads that promote the magic machine that stretches out your pain. I haven’t tried these but I’ve asked many professionals if they think they are for real. The most frequent answer that I receive is that they do help with the pain, but only if you keep going for a lifetime. The pain quickly returns after you stop.

### Gravity Table

These tables work on the principle that pain is relieved by spinal decompression; i.e. you are turned upside down on the table with your feet fastened in the up position. This does tend to separate your vertebrae and gives some “breathing space” to the nerves that emanate between the interstitial spaces. I bought one, used it for a few months, and then sold it on Craig’s list. It didn’t have any major impact on my pain but several others claimed that it was very helpful. I’m guessing that it will help some kinds of problems and not others. If you do opt to buy one, buy a quality table. You can probably find used ones on Craig’s list or eBay.

## ONGOING ACTIVITIES

### Back Pillow

The back and sciatic pain is probably most intense while you are sitting. Until it subsides, use one of those kidney-shaped back pillows and carry it with you everywhere you go. Don't be embarrassed – you will quickly spot other people in our club!

### Strengthen Core Muscles

Your “core” muscles are like a girdle that surrounds your lower back and belly. You may have tried a real girdle and noticed that it reduced your pain. Strengthening your core muscles has exactly the same effect, but it also has the added benefit that it will significantly help you to prevent a recurrence should you encounter an event that will injure your back. A good physiotherapist can teach you how to exercise your core. The secret is that you **have to do your exercises** on a regular basis, at least 2-3 times/week. Yoga is also a great way to strengthen your core.

### Recruit Muscles

After you have strengthened your core muscles it is important to learn how to use them. You have probably noticed that your pain is worst when you rise from a prone or sitting position. Before rising, start to form the habit of “recruiting” your core muscles. In effect, this is like consciously creating that muscle girdle which, in turn, keeps you spine aligned as you arise. After a while this becomes automatic.

### Stretching

When you experience pain your body automatically tries to protect itself by tightening muscles in the pain regions. This produces even more pain and discomfort. ***The most important advice than I can provide to anyone is to stretch your entire body in order to get rid of that muscle tightness.*** That tightness will be the single most important thing that will interfere with your lifestyle.

You must know which muscles to stretch and how to stretch them. I recommend that you schedule a session with an experienced *physiotherapist* in order to learn how to properly stretch. If you live in the Montreal area I will be happy to invite you to my gym (or you invite me to yours) and I will show you my stretching routine.

### Exercise

Once again, this is very important. You should never do anything that increases your pain, but *do not shy away from exercise just because you have pain.* Regular exercise is as good as a drug. It helps to build important core muscles and also to relax others. Yoga is also great.

You should schedule a visit to a physiotherapist in order to learn how to strengthen you core muscles. This is very important for future relief from pain. You don't have to start this during the time of your excruciating pain (although it doesn't hurt you), but you should start before you are completely healed.

In addition to core muscle exercises I walk on a treadmill for 60 minutes, two to three times a week at moderate speeds and elevation. **Caution: Do not use high elevations; it will create more back problems.** At the outset, stick with treadmill pre-programmed routines that keep elevations below 2-3

degrees and speeds below 3.8 MPH. I also do very moderate weight-lifting, not heavy weights which will bulk you up, but many reps of light resistance which just keeps your muscles toned. If you have never previously done weights then you should have a couple of sessions with a trainer. But, beware, most trainers know nothing about back problems, so do not take their advice about exercises that you should do for your spine. Just explain that you can't do heavy weights – you just want to learn technique.

### **Sleeping**

You spend 1/4 of your life sleeping, so you should do it properly. Your back/sciatic pain is probably worst when you get out of bed in the morning. Using quality sleep products are important. Try to sleep on your side, curled up in a semi foetal position. Avoid sleeping on your back or stomach – it puts too much pressure on the spine and/or heart.

### **Knee Pillow**

Sleep with a small pillow between your knees. It reduces the pressure on your lower back. I'm currently designing a pillow with Velcro straps that will stay in place all night without repositioning and I will sell them at cost when they are available.

### **Mattress& Pillow**

Two words: **Memory Foam**. They are expensive, but everyone swears by them. You can get an inexpensive memory foam pillow at Costco. I've been told that many of the "no-name" mattresses are as good as the major brands.

## **Ergonomics**

### **Chairs**

If you spend many hours sitting at work then it really pays to get a chair that allows you to adjust height from floor, height of arms, back tilt separate from seat tilt and to match the depth of the seat to your frame size. These chairs tend to be expensive but they are really worthwhile. Remember, you spend another 20-25% of your life in your work chair! (My own chair is manufactured by xxxxxx). It is vital for your entire back to firmly press against the chair back at all times. This may take some work, since we all tend to slouch forward while sitting at a computer.

### **Foot Blocks**

It is important that your feet be firmly planted on the ground while sitting at your computer. There are many commercial products available that provide good elevation. If you travel a lot on airplanes, try to get one of the portable types.

### **Eyeglasses**

Yes, believe it or not your vision can have an effect on your back and neck. If you wear progressive lenses you may either be tilting your neck up or leaning forward to better see your computer screen. I plan to write a separate advice sheet on eyeglass selection. Stay tuned. For the moment, I advise anyone over who wears progressive lenses to consider purchasing a separate pair of glasses with **plain vision** (i.e. non-progressive) lenses to be used with a computer. **Important Note: You need to tell your optometrist whether you use a regular computer screen or a laptop.**

## **OTHER**

I am sincere about helping others. Send me an email with your telephone number and when it is the best time to call. I can be reached at [gary.bernstein@mcgill.ca](mailto:gary.bernstein@mcgill.ca) .