



# What's Making You Surrender?

A Comprehensive Review of The Most Common Back Pain Treatment Approaches



THE BACK UNIVERSITY

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## Back Pain Miracle Cures...**WHATEVER!**

Consider the following statistics:

- Approximately 70-85% of our population suffers from low back pain at some point in their life.
- The estimated cost of back pain to the U.S. economy alone was between \$50 billion and \$200 billion each year!

In looking at these statistics, it would seem that if there truly a miracle cure, everyone would be using it or doing it and consequently these numbers would be much lower and you wouldn't need to be reading this report. In this report I am going to outline some of the most common back pain treatments you may have tried and why they failed to deliver lasting relief. It is straight to the point so...

Let's begin!

I see many patients coming to physical therapy that have tried a number of treatments to relieve their pain. Some have tried the usual round of muscle relaxants and painkillers. Some have tried going to a chiropractor or massage therapist for their back pain. Others have tried spinal injections. Many have tried working with personal trainers at the gym, acupuncturists, or even other physical therapists. A few have even tried devices obtained off the internet like magnets, heat patches, and back massagers.

So, why is it that you still have back pain? Why is back pain still the second most common reason that people visit a doctor...second only to the common cold? The reason is that most of the treatments available for back pain today attempt to get rid of the **symptoms** of back pain. That sounds good, you say, what is wrong with that?

The problem with just managing the symptoms of back pain is that you are not eliminating the factors that caused the back pain in the first place. It's like you are putting a band aid on a huge cut; it may help with the bleeding some...and it may even help to cover up the wound a little, but you are not doing anything to take care of the wound itself.

One of my goals is to help you become a more informed consumer. In order to do this, I want to review a few of the treatment approaches you have probably tried. More importantly, I want to help you see why they have not successfully eliminated your back pain.

**Pain Medications/Muscle Relaxers**

Though these types of drugs can be effective for temporarily decreasing the symptoms of back pain, they do nothing to change what caused the problem in the first place. Do not get me wrong, I think pain relievers and muscle relaxers can both be very beneficial in the treatment of back pain. However, the main benefit from them I have seen clinically is when someone uses them so they can tolerate an exercise program. There is no substantial research to show that these medications are effective in the treatment and prevention of back pain when used alone.

The reason for this is that they simply “mask” the pain, but they do not fix what is causing the pain. Back pain itself is the manifestation of another problem...it is not the primary problem itself! In other words, back pain does not just happen for any reason. There is something going on in your body that causes the pain.

Consequently, it makes sense that if something else were causing the pain, why would taking a medication to decrease the pain be effective as a long-term remedy for your problem.

Another downside to medications is their “side effects.” Most medications used to treat pain or muscle spasm come with a long list of “side effects” that can out weigh the benefits of taking the drug in the first place. It was not too long ago when Bextra and Vioxx (two commonly prescribed drugs) were pulled off the market after it was

discovered they raised the risk of a heart attack. Even over-the-counter drugs can have negative effects on your digestive system. Some even cause intestinal bleeding in higher dosages.

## **Bed Rest**

Though bed rest is not as widespread of a treatment anymore, I still find a small percentage of people that come to physical therapy after having tried bed rest for several days, thinking their pain would go away. Research clearly shows that not only does bed rest not “fix” back pain; it can actually make it worse. It can also leave an individual with decreased range of motion, flexibility, and muscle tone, which are all vital for the elimination of back pain. Research also shows that those who stay active during episodes of back pain do better than those who stay more sedentary.

Another key reason that bed rest is ineffective is that it does not do anything to change what caused the pain in the first place. It simply attempts to provide temporary relief for the symptoms themselves.

## **Heat/Ice**

Though heat and/or ice have never been scientifically proven to eliminate back pain when used alone, I believe these are a helpful modality to use in the treatment of back pain. Personally, I think the use of heat/ice is good for the fact that they can provide temporary relief of back pain. This allows you to exercise and move around in

less pain, which ultimately increases the rate at which you are able to recover.

Ice, when used shortly after an initial injury or flare up, is effective in limiting the amount of inflammation or swelling at the site of an injury. This is important because inflammation and swelling cause pain and stiffness. They can also limit range of motion in a muscle or joint and make it difficult for you to stay active after an injury.

Heat also has some benefits by increasing blood flow into and out of the injured area. This is beneficial because it “flushes” the swelling out of an area by increasing the blood flow. Additionally, heat helps to relax muscles, which generally allows one to move easier and with less pain.

Again, though heat and ice both have some positive benefits for helping back pain, they do nothing to address what caused the pain in the first place, which is problematic.

## **Chiropractic**

Before I begin this section, I want to make it clear that I am not putting down the chiropractic field in general. I work regularly with chiropractors who are very good at what they do. In fact, my advanced residency in manual therapy went into great depth on the benefits of using joint manipulation (what most people think of as getting your neck or back “adjusted”) as part of our treatment plan.

Spinal manipulations can be a very valuable part of the treatment plan for a person with low back pain. Additionally, this particular form of treatment has shown to be very effective when combined with other forms of treatment for the temporary relief of pain. However, like many other forms of treatment, chiropractic treatment used alone is insufficient in eliminating back pain **and** in preventing a person from re-injury.

In my practice, I have seen some patients get fantastic results from joint manipulation. Like many things, I have had some patients experience good results with a chiropractor, and I have had other patients that have had terrible experiences and increased pain. Like any other profession, there are some good chiropractors, and there are some bad chiropractors...just like there are good auto mechanics and bad auto mechanics. It is a fact no matter what field you look at.

The problem I have seen with the long-term use of chiropractic treatments for back pain is two fold. First, many chiropractors have a tendency to keep their patients coming back for long periods, perhaps even years for treatment. For example, about five years ago, I had a patient come to physical therapy for low back pain. On his first visit, he reported that he had been having back pain for about three years. He also told me that he had been going to his chiropractor for 2-3 times a week for the last three years to get his neck and back “adjusted,” but that he had not tried much other than that.

During our initial visit, I asked him if he felt the treatment had been helping him to get rid of his back pain. He said he always felt better after he left the chiropractor's office, but that the pain kept coming back. Additionally, he said he felt it was helping him, though he was somewhat concerned that he had to keep going back several times a week after so long.

In order to provoke some critical thinking on his part, I asked him why he still had to go regularly after three years of treatment if his chiropractic treatment was working to get rid of his pain. (I always question the effectiveness of any treatment that you have to go back for week after week, month after month, and year after year). After all, the goal of an effective treatment should be to empower **YOU** in knowing how to manage your back, so that you do not need to keep coming back to a healthcare practitioner. Honestly, I take it a little personally if one of my patients has to come back numerous times for the same problem because I feel I have not done an effective job in empowering them to keep their condition for re-occurring.

The second problem I find with using chiropractic, or joint manipulation, as your sole form of treatment for back pain is that, while getting your joints "re-aligned" is a great thing, that is where most chiropractic treatment ends. In other words, what happens when you get your back re-aligned, but you don't do anything to change what is pulling your joints into an improper alignment in the first place? You have to go back to the chiropractor to be "re-aligned" time after time.

Again, you have to make sure that you are training your body to stabilize your new position, and in how to move properly in the future, so that you do not continue to throw your back out of position. Unfortunately, the majority of chiropractors overlook the importance of this and consequently, patients have to return for multiple appointments.

### **Massage Therapy**

There are several great benefits to massage therapy. Who does not like to get a massage, right? According to the American Massage Therapy Association, research shows that massage provides several important benefits to your health. A few of these benefits that are important in managing back pain include:

- It increases blood flow to an area, which helps the healing process
- It relaxes muscles, which helps them gain range of motion. This is important because movement is an important part of the healing process for back pain.
- Massage increases the release of endorphins, which are the body's natural painkillers.

Though massage can be an important treatment approach in treating back pain, it is seldom effective in eliminating pain when used by itself. The reason for this is that the massage is not doing anything to

change the **cause** of the back pain. Is this starting to sound familiar? Massage is a great treatment, but since it does nothing to help with strengthening weak muscle groups or re-educating movement patterns, it is not that effective for eliminating back and preventing re-injury.

### **Acupuncture**

Acupuncture involves the insertion of needles (roughly the width of a human hair) at specific points throughout the body. Acupuncture practitioners believe this keeps the body's energy flowing smoothly and that it causes the body to release endorphins, which are the body's natural painkillers. Though I have personally seen several patients get relief of their symptoms from acupuncture, I have also seen just as many that have a hard time telling a difference at all. It seems to be hit or miss depending on the patient.

Despite the fact that some people get temporary relief from their symptoms with acupuncture, there is an overall lack of clinical evidence that acupuncture is an effective treatment in eliminating back pain for good. Personally, I think the biggest reason for this is that acupuncture does nothing to retrain the muscles that stabilize the spine, improve posture, and body mechanics. Additionally, it does nothing to address work ergonomics, flexibility, or to help you change your daily habits...it simply treats the symptoms of your problem.

## **Spinal Decompression**

Spinal decompression is a non-surgical approach to treating neck and back pain. In this treatment, a person is strapped onto a decompression table that uses a motorized unit to stretch the spine, taking pressure off the discs and ligaments of the neck or back.

I have seen some very positive results using decompression for people with disc bulges or herniations because it is very effective in alleviating the acute symptoms of pain or nerve irritation. I have also seen patients with other diagnoses do well with spinal decompression. Though spinal decompression does work very well for some, it is certainly limited in its effectiveness.

The reason I say this is that there are hundreds of causes for back pain. In my experience, it works great for some diagnoses, while it is not as helpful for others. Though I think spinal decompression is a great tool for alleviating a person's immediate symptoms (again, depending on the diagnosis), it is not the end all be all treatment for back pain because it does nothing to retrain the muscles that stabilize the spine, improve work posture, body mechanics, work ergonomics, or flexibility.

I know of many chiropractic and physician's offices that charge their patients thousands of dollars for a months worth of treatments. Again, though this can be a useful treatment, I see it frequently

promoted as the “cure” for a person’s back pain, with little to no mention that the treatment is only a small piece of the puzzle.

## **Spinal Surgery**

Despite the fact that we are striving to find conservative and effective treatments for back pain, the number of spinal surgeries performed each year is on the rise. In fact, according to a recent article in the New York Times and the National Center for Health Statistics, Americans undergo more than 300,000 spinal fusion surgeries a year, each at an average cost of over \$59,000. Additionally, almost as many undergo laminectomies or discectomies.

Perhaps the biggest problem with back surgery is the potential for drastic consequences if the surgery does not go as planned. Some of the consequences can change your life forever, causing increased pain or even permanent disability.

To reiterate this particular point, not long ago, I ran across a recent study that found over 10% of patients undergoing spinal surgery developed an infection (which can cause severe consequences in the spine) or other serious complications. Some of you may be thinking, “10% doesn’t sound that bad...I’ll take my chances.” However, the most disturbing statistic from this study was that of the patients undergoing spinal surgery in this particular study, over half of those were having surgery to correct complications caused from a previous spinal surgery!

## **Devices, Creams, and Other Miscellaneous Gadgets**

Over the years, I have worked on many patients seeking pain relief through various creams, liniments, magnets, etc... Although some patients seem to get temporary relief, which is a good thing, none of these does anything to change the true cause of back pain itself.

Just like everything else we have discussed, none of these teaches you how to move properly, change your workstation set-up, perform the right exercises and stretches to take stress of your spine, or how to sit, stand, and move with proper posture.

Though I think that all of the things we have discussed have their part in helping alleviate back pain, let me tell you why what you have done thus far has not worked to give you long-term relief of your back pain.

**Eliminating back pain takes a comprehensive approach!** In other words, treating back pain through one approach (i.e. taking pain medications, going to the chiropractor, getting a massage, a few visits of physical therapy, or getting an injection) is simply ineffective.

There. I said it. Treating back pain effectively requires addressing every area of your life!

Unfortunately, many of the specialists you see for back pain have tunnel vision when it comes to treating your back pain.

Consequently, many specialists see their specialty as the only thing you need to help alleviate your pain. This is simply untrue! Nor is it

backed by research. Perhaps this is because many of the specialists you see do not fully understand the true causes of back pain. A recent article in the New York Times estimated that approximately 85% of the people that seek help for their back pain never find out what caused their back pain in the first place. (You can read the full article here: <http://health.nytimes.com/ref/health/healthguide/esn-backpain-ess.html?scp=1&sq=85%%20of%%20back%%20pain%%20causes%%20%%20not%%20identified&st=cse>)

Frankly, our lack of knowledge in the true causes of back pain and our narrow-minded approach in treating it is one of the big reasons that our overall treatment of back pain is still relatively ineffective. Though some may disagree with me on that, you cannot argue with objective numbers. The fact is the United States alone spends an estimated \$20 billion dollars every year on the *direct* cost of back pain. I am only talking about the direct costs such as X-rays, MRIs, medications, physical therapy, surgery, hospital stays, etc... This figure does not even include the estimated amount of money for lost work, lost salary, and lost productivity that back pain has on our society.

So why is it that our treatment of back pain is still ineffective in an age where technology in other areas is so fantastic? I believe it goes back to the "Health Care" system. Insurances do not cover comprehensive, preventative forms of treatment, but prefer to pay their share after it is too late! Because insurances do not pay for comprehensive back programs, no one really offers them to the public.

In an effort to make you an even more informed consumer, I have created a **Quack Test**<sup>®</sup> that you can use to evaluate any treatment approach you are considering for you back pain to determine if it is legitimate and not just a “quack shack” scam.

## **The Quack Test<sup>®</sup> ...if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's a quack!**

1. Does the treatment address the **cause** of back pain rather than just the symptom of pain?
2. If the treatment addresses the cause of back pain, does it treat the cause of the cause when it is resolved? (For example, if your back pain is caused by a bulging disc, and your treatment helps reduce the bulging disc, does it then help you to understand what caused the problem in the first place, and how to fix it, so that the bulging disc doesn't get worse for the same reasons it came about in the first place?)
3. Does your treatment teach you how to maintain a neutral spine (proper posture) while doing daily activities?
4. Does your treatment teach you a comprehensive flexibility, strengthening, and core stability routine to decrease unnecessary stresses on your spine?
5. Does your treatment option educate you in lifestyle changes to prevent your pain from reoccurring?

If you answered no to any one of these questions, keep searching...chances are the current treatment you're receiving is not going to be successful in eliminating your pain and preventing it from reoccurring!

Please feel free to share this report with anyone suffering from back pain that you feel might benefit from this information. In addition, if you would like more information you can visit the link below:

<http://www.thebackuniversity.com>