

Taking care of your back

by Kathleen Elliott (the Guelph Mercury)

Very few of us know what optimal health feels like.

That's because we don't listen to our body's signals. We take action only when we're not feeling well.

We have a headache and we seek relief. We have a backache and we seek treatment.

We are a society of healers.

"One of the oldest myths is that if we feel OK and have no symptoms then we must be OK," said Dr. Philip McAllister, owner of Back to Basics Chiropractic and Rehabilitation Centre in Hartsland Market Square.

"By the time you notice the symptoms you may have had problems for weeks or months."

One of the misconceptions people have is that a lack of symptoms means good health.

A headache means problems, aches and pains mean problems, a stiff neck means problems and a sore back means problems. But many people think an absence of aches and pains means no problems.

That isn't always the case.

Which is why McAllister spends a good chunk of his time educating his patients.

"We're not a typical chiropractic service where you go in, get snapped and you're in and out of there in two minutes," he said. "The bottom line is always treat the individual as a whole and not always look at just what is presented forthright to you."

McAllister said if he just concentrated on manipulating the spine and cracking backs he wouldn't

be doing his patients any good because inevitably they'd all be coming back weeks later to have him fix their problem again.

By educating his patients and having them take an active role in their treatment McAllister helps his patients to help themselves.

As a chiropractor, two of the most common ailments McAllister sees are lower back problems and headaches.

For everyone who comes into his clinic complaining of lower back problems, about 50-60 per cent of them actually have problems with their backs. The other 40-50 per



Dr. Philip McAllister demonstrates a stability exercise on one of the balls at his chiropractic and rehabilitation centre. This exercise is good for people with low back problems, one of the most common ailments McAllister treats.

cent have problems elsewhere. An out-of-function kidney could be contributing to low back pain, for example.

"The body is affected by so many avenues," said McAllister. "It's not just a simple bone out of place thing."

Lifestyles factors such as lifting, bending and twisting are the biggest contributors to low back pain. People who sit at desks all day, those with bad posture or weak abdominal muscles, those who aren't eating a healthy diet, those who aren't exercising properly and those who do repetitive movements at work can be at risk.

"Posture is an overall factor," said McAllister.

If you're continuously slumped over or if your chin juts out too far you're just asking for trouble.

During the night our sleeping habits can contribute to back pain as the result of bad posture.

"If you sleep like a pretzel or you sleep on your stomach, those are all big no-nos," said McAllister.

During the night, where many of us spend a good six to nine hours, our backs need to relax. Think of it like this; if you sit at a desk for eight hours a day with your neck twisted to the side your neck isn't going to feel so good by the end of the day.

Think about how you would feel after sleeping in an awkward position for eight hours. Your body needs to be in a neutral position to wake feeling rested and pain-free. McAllister recommends the fetal position or lying on your back with a pillow propped under your knees to take the strain off your lower back.

"People know so little about their

bodies," he said.

"A lot of this is understanding that stress is a major influence in our lives."

By identifying what particular stressors are in your life you can take charge and make changes to prevent injury. Or you can wait until it's too late and seek treatment.

"If you're sitting at a desk all day put an egg timer beside you and get up and take short walks," he said. "The body was made to move, not sit all day."

McAllister said he takes great joy in watching his patients take an active role in their care. It's exciting for him to watch his patients as they make improvements.

"The goal of any doctor is to educate the patient," he said.

"Anybody and everybody benefits from good maintenance care. Everybody has got a lot of stressors and everyone is so different."

So many times people want a quick fix, said McAllister. They're in pain, they come into the clinic, they want their back cracked, they feel better and they leave.

But McAllister cautions that quick fixes are just that. They don't offer lasting results. Within weeks or months that person will be back, looking for another quick fix.

McAllister uses the analogy that body care is a lot like car care.

We don't think twice about taking our car in for regular tune-ups. We know we have to put oil into the car before the engine explodes and we know if we don't put gas in our car it's not going to run.

Our bodies work the same way.

If we wait until there are problems to fix it's going to be more costly.

If we'd only changed the oil in our car we wouldn't be rebuilding our engine.

So too, if we'd only taken better care of our bodies we wouldn't be seeking treatment when we're in pain.

"It's easier to stay well than to get well," said McAllister.

It's the patients who want to take better care of themselves and feel better that benefit the most. But the majority of people don't know what optimal health feels like. They think they're fine even though they spend all day working in a factory, doing the same activity over and over.

Even without any aches and pains most of us aren't functioning at the best level we could.

Some people say they can't stand for long periods of time, said McAllister.

Optimal health means being able to tolerate positions for longer, without paying for it later.

It means coming home from work with energy and not wanting to veg out in front of the TV.

"Being out of pain is only step one," he said. "We need to stabilize and strengthen."

McAllister's hope is that everyone takes note of the stressors in their lives. If you do sit at a desk all day know that if you're not taking care of your body you could be facing problems down the road. If you're working out with weights make sure you've been shown how to use them properly. Don't wait until it's too late to seek help.

Learning all you can about your body now can help you feel your best and if problems do arise you'll know how to better manage them.