

Exercising That Back Pain Away

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Jamie Rector for The New York Times

Evelyn Castro of Los Angeles was a dedicated athlete who became fearful of exercise after back pain struck. But she has since found relief in yoga.

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EVERY morning for nearly a year, Evelyn Castro had to roll out of bed, literally. She would grip the side of the mattress and gingerly ease herself out in a crouch position to avoid sharpening the dull ache in her lower back. Then she would make her way, wincing, downstairs to brush her teeth, stooping so low in front of the sink that she could not see her face in the mirror.

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Ms. Castro, 34, a financial analyst in the Encino

section of Los Angeles, had the kind of unexplained back pain that afflicts at least 70 percent of Americans at some point in

their lives. But she was an active person - a marathon runner and a cyclist - and despite her pain she wanted to continue training. Her doctor advised her to take it easy, so she decided to try short, slow runs. But the first time she laced up her running shoes, she found her pain was compounded by anxiety. "My whole back stiffened," she said, "and I remember thinking: 'What am I doing to myself? This isn't worth it.' I was afraid that it would worsen with activity." She put the running shoes away.

The question of whether to exercise during back pain has confused doctors and patients for years. Research has shown that movement can help heal backs, and within the last several years the medical consensus has shifted away from bed rest and toward exercise, even for people who are not used to daily workouts. Many back specialists now write prescriptions for Pilates, elliptical machines and water aerobics.

But in counseling patients to take the medicine, they are confronting an unexpected hurdle: fear. They are finding that the fear of exercise - and the inactivity that results - can turn what could be short-term back pain into a lifetime of trouble.

"People are afraid of the spine," said Dr. James N. Weinstein, an orthopedic surgeon and back researcher at Dartmouth Medical School. "There's a fear that they could really do damage to themselves."

That even a dedicated athlete like Ms. Castro would be afraid of working out

shows just how powerful the fear can be. Confirmed couch potatoes may be even more afraid, said Dr. Stanley A. Herring, the medical director of spine care at the University of Washington, in Seattle, and a team physician for the Seahawks. "If they don't even have a base understanding of exercise - they're not used to being sore or tired - and they have high anxiety, that's a bad combination," he said.

In an age of M.R.I. scans and spinal fusion surgery, a treatment as low-tech as exercise can seem to some patients rudimentary or even dangerously illogical.

"Some patients definitely feel that it's going to be counterproductive," said Dr. Francis O'Connor, a general practitioner specializing in sports medicine at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Md.

But cardiovascular exercise can increase mobility and help circulation, while strengthening the core muscles closest to the spine can protect against future pain.

The most fearful patients actually stand to benefit the most from exercising despite their pain because it helps them view it differently, said Dr. James Rainville, the chief of physical medicine and rehabilitation at the New England Baptist Hospital in Boston.

Bertil Lundqvist, a lawyer in Manhattan, is one example. For two years Mr. Lundqvist suffered debilitating back pain. On a scale of 1 to 10, it was a constant 6, he said. He explored every treatment option short of surgery, including steroid

shots and acupuncture; he also gave up playing tennis, going to the gym and racing his blue-and-yellow Porsche. His physical therapist advised him to be cautious. "The general idea was, 'If it hurts, don't do it,'" Mr. Lundqvist, 57, said. "And everything hurt."

In desperation he saw Dr. Rainville, who prescribed stretching, weight lifting and aerobic exercise. In the beginning Mr. Lundqvist could barely walk a block, but after four weeks, he was running at least a half hour on a treadmill. Now, four months into his exercise program, his back pain rates only a 2 or 3, with periods of no ache at all. And he is back behind the wheel, racing around the track at 175 miles an hour.

"It's the exercise, but it's also the mindset," Mr. Lundqvist said, explaining his turnaround. "I realized that I don't have to be afraid that this will get worse."