

The Sporting Back

Low back pain will affect 70% of the population at some time in their lives, whether they are fit or unfit. Most of these sufferers will recover, without treatment, in about 3 months, but 50% may develop recurring problems. This article focuses mainly on the prevention of low back problems and the rehabilitation of the athlete.

Both acute and chronic low back conditions are helped with treatment from a physical therapist. In the UK the sufferer is most likely to think of going to an osteopath, chiropractor, or physiotherapist. (Most of these practitioners will be listed in the local telephone directories, but not necessarily on the web!) Endurance athletes are not known for their patience with injuries, and waiting 3 months for their low back pain to resolve is not often an option that they are prepared to take, so many of you will already have your own pet osteopath.

The causes of low back pain are many, varying from leg length inequality to psychological problems. Thus the treatment of one individual's low back condition may be different to the advice and treatment given to another person. Nevertheless, there is a general guide that the endurance athlete should be aware of: Your back reflects your level of fitness. It can be argued that fitness is measured by the athlete's strength, stamina, flexibility and co-ordination. These are the factors that will affect your low back too. For example, weak lower lumbar muscles will leave the lumbar area open to injury, poor stamina of the abdominal musculature will mean that the low-back is unsupported, poor hip flexibility will increase the work load on the lumbar spine, and poor co-ordination can increase the risk of direct trauma to the lower back.

Strength: Working on the strength of the back musculature is fairly obvious, and most people are now aware that abdominal strength is very important to low-back stability. Also important is gluteal power, and there is an increase in evidence that pelvic floor tone (for men as well as women) can help to support the lower back.

Stamina: Preaching to endurance athletes about stamina is rather ridiculous, but remember, with the muscle groups listed above you are trying to achieve tone that will help your back for the entire marathon, not just a quick sprint.

Flexibility: Runners need to spend a lot of time stretching. In particular, long distance runners should concentrate on keeping the mid and low back free, together with good glutes and hamstring flexibility. Of course, none of these areas should be worked on instead of another, rather, as well as.

Co-ordination: Good co-ordination with all movements is essential in any sport and through daily activities in general. For endurance runners, and especially those who run off-road on loose, uneven surfaces, good co-ordination is very important, and often over-looked. The athlete should concentrate on hopping, running figures of eight, tight circles, and even use wobble boards.

Working on the elements listed above will help to reduce the frequency and intensity of low-back problems, but will not bring about immunity to lumbar pain. Professional guidance is always useful, but can be expensive. The advice above should keep your osteopath driving a Mondeo not a Jag, your chiropractor holidaying in Bournemouth not the British Virgin Islands, and your physio eating at Ken's kebab van instead of Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons.

*Andrew Peters
Osteopath*