

The McKenzie Approach to Low Back Pain

Robin McKenzie, a physiotherapist in New Zealand, founded the McKenzie Institute in 1981. The institute has now become a worldwide organization, which promotes research and education in the methods of examination and treatment to physical therapists, chiropractors and doctors. Although controversy still exists in the treatment of low back pain, many studies now recognize the effectiveness of McKenzie's methods.



Low Back Pain (LBP) is a widespread problem in the U.S. Approximately 80% of all persons will experience LBP at least once in their lives. LBP is the most common cause of limited activities in person's 45 years old and under. Missed days of work cost U.S. industries \$14 billion per year. Truck drivers are more affected by LBP than any other group in the U.S.

Although there are many causes of LBP, McKenzie states that the number one cause of LBP is poor sitting and posture (which would explain why truck drivers are largely affected). Good sitting posture maintains the spinal curves that are clearly visible when one stands up. Poor sitting posture tends to flex the spine or, stated simply, reduce the curve in one's low back. Such poor posture places the ligamentous structures in the low back on full stretch and produces pain. If prolonged, serious damage and disc problems can arise.

Since poor sitting posture can cause LBP, it is no surprise that it has become such a widespread epidemic. The majority of people spend a greater amount of time sitting than in any other position. If you break down your own typical day, think about the amount of time you spend sitting to eat, driving to work, sitting at your desk, driving back home, watching television, etc.

Studies have shown that LBP is self-limiting and that 92% of people with LBP will be better in 2 months. In other words, these people will get better whether or not they receive treatment. The problem is that 90% of LBP is recurrent and these same people will continue to have low back problems throughout their lives. Herein lies the strength of the McKenzie approach, which places an emphasis on self-management by the patient. If a patient clearly understands his or her problem and is properly instructed in an individualized therapeutic program, then the rate of recurrence will significantly decrease. McKenzie also emphasizes proper sitting and standing postures in addition to proper lifting techniques.

The McKenzie approach focuses on pain patterns, for instance is pain localized to the low back or does it radiate into the leg and foot. A McKenzie evaluation would look at repetitive movements and determine if these movements produce or abolish one's low back pain. Subsequently, an individualized therapeutic exercise program would be established. Exercises always begin with self-exercises by the patient with no intervention by the therapist, other than instruction. In other words, we start "hands-off" before having the therapist intervene "hands-on". The McKenzie approach encourages having patients to take an active role in understanding and resolving their problem.

This has been a brief overview of the McKenzie method. Should you have any questions concerning examination or treatment, feel free to contact our offices and speak to physical therapist.

