



Backache - Notoalgia

Universal Occurrence/Ignorance

Backache is a symptom / complaint / diagnosis by a patient, that would weigh less on the bearer if the physician were to majestically label his problem as notoalgia, from noto (Gk)=back, and algos (Gk)=pain. So very often, a high-sounding diagnosis satisfies a patient/relations that the fees paid have been worth, a point cinematically presented by the hero of the movie *Anand*, when he proudly announces his diagnosis as *Lymphosarcoma of the Intestine*.

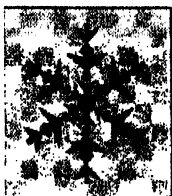
Backache, bodyache and bowel ache comprise a trinity characterized by an all too commonness and inscrutability. Their summing up is typified by Oxford *Handbook of Clinical Medicine*: Irritable Bowel Syndrome is characterized by troublesome gastrointestinal symptoms experienced in the absence of any organic pathology. The disease is one of negatives: there is no structural pathology, no test is diagnostic, and there is no cure. This is unfortunate, given that IBS is the commonest diagnosis made in GI clinics. In fact, the lifetime prevalence of IBS is ³20%; luckily most sufferers choose not to go to a doctor.

You can like up the prevalence of backache to 50% and bodyache to 80%. The trio is bread-butter-n-BMW of general practice, allopathy, homoeopathy, which-ever-pathy. If the last 1000 years of organised medicine have not cracked the problem, the next 1000 will not. Good for doctors, and not too bad for the patients for whom symptomatic relief is often there for the asking. When nothing really works, then everything does. Hence the plethora of pills, potions, and procedures for backache and its allies.

It is customary amongst the lay and the learned, to proclaim that backache is a price mankind has had to pay for straightening the stoop of his Neanderthal ancestor. Ditto, for piles and varicose veins. Such an approach explains away everything without explaining anything. It certainly adds to the conceit and vanity of the *Homo sapiens* who feels smugly proud that the species has paid a price for a positive evolutionary gain. A small percentage of backaches does have a discernible cause that yields readily, easily, and rewardingly to the surgical knife wielded wide or as is now the fashion, through a scope. But the bulk of backache demands pills, physiotherapy, vibrators and compressors, exercise, loosing weight, and a panoply of herbal and not-so-herbal remedies. And most of these go to their grave/pyre carrying the ache on their back, into late years of life. Backache should be befriended and so treated. It will then quarrel less with you, and demand less.

The human vertebral column from just below the skull to the coccyx, not excluding the sacro-iliac joints, is a veritable museum of joints fashioned with dexterity by the embryo and maintained largely in good shape by a myriad ligaments, fasciae, and nerves, all participating in a symphonic orchestra, that is large and largely silent. It is a sight in and around Nainital, when you see a frail Nepali of 50 kg, merrily taking more than twice that load, on his deliberately bent back, and comfortably negotiating the ups and down of the hilly area. You see him and you will throw away to the winds all your ideas about the insults that the human intervertebral discs can take before they burst to gift the owner with PID.

Scientific progressivists are not aware that the advances of sex-typing unleashed an epidemic of female feticide, and the test tube babies took away the chance of an orphan to be adopted by an "affording" couple. Likewise, the imaging advances of CT/MRI have,



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except in select cases, done the double-disservice of (a) making a person needlessly aware of some "pathology" that was silent and would have so remained, and (b) hiked up the surgeries on the back by ostensibly justifying the same by revealing the so-called problem.

Backache is often a sign of poor posture, poor muscle tone and largely poor self respect. Many a daughter-in-law degraded by family and the society, has lost her ability to hold her head high and to carry herself with a

straight back. So for an employee or any individual. We need a social structure in which no person is taken as superior to another and no person is taken as inferior to another. Surely then, the incidence of backache will go down.

Homoeopathy should take heart from the fact that its arch rival and condemner, namely allopathy, is quite ignorant and confused. We leave it to homoeopaths to decide where they fit in.



Backache: General Concepts

Backache is one of the commonest problems presenting in a Primary Care Physician's clinic, with almost 90% - 95% patients getting backache, of whatever cause, at least once in their lifetime. Besides injury, infections and degenerative changes, backache most commonly results from bad posture i.e. placing too much stress on the back - as in lifting a heavy object, bending wrongly and sitting, standing, sleeping for several hours continuously or in incorrect positions.

To understand backache, we must first realize the importance of a normal spine. The busy and stressful life we lead, is possible only due to the spine that acts as support for the human frame, keeping it upright for long hours at a stretch and allowing for all kinds of contortions. The spine, made of 33 vertebrae, features three natural curves:

- The cervical curve, with 7 vertebrae in the neck area which allows us to turn our head freely.
- The thoracic curve, with 12 vertebrae in the upper-back, each of them attached to a rib, provides stability, at the cost of free movement, like the

cervical vertebrae

- The lumbar curve, with 5 vertebrae in the lower back, which receives the most stress and strain as it has to bear the weight of all abdominal organs pressing against the abdominal wall and no benefit of support like the thoracic curve.
- Below the lumbar region are 5 fused vertebrae of the sacrum and 4 fused vertebrae of the coccyx.

Then there are inter vertebral disc(s) to cushion the vertebrae and absorb shocks to the spine during movements. Joining each pair of vertebrae is a facet joint that functions like a hinge.

Causes:

1. Mechanical—spine and multitude of joints. Excessive pressure or strain on the back may result in strains or sprains. A ligament stretched beyond its limit sends pain signals. A muscle given a task that the body is not accustomed to, responds with severe tearing pain. It and nearby muscles go into a temporary, protective spasm - to discourage continued use. Pain → spasm → pain is a vicious cycle that is often protective.
2. Disc Prolapse: most often seen in the Lumbar region as the vertebrae are unsupported on either side and subjected to a wide range of movements. Lowest 2 lumbar discs (L4-L5 & L5-S1) are more prone.
 - L4 L5 prolapse – L5 root compression: - great



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