

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

## Chiropractic for Middle Back Pain Part I: Common Causes

*If you have ever experienced pain in your middle back (thoracic area), you have plenty of company. One study estimates that 30 percent of working adults experience at least one episode of middle back pain each year (J Occup Health 2009;51:177-92).*

*The good news is that chiropractic care effectively alleviates both acute and chronic pain of the middle back. In part one of this two-part series, Dr. Gravesen describes the most common causes of middle back pain.*

### The Spinal Connection

Like other types of back pain, middle back pain is often rooted in a misalignment of the vertebrae. This common malady is called *vertebral subluxation*.

Over time, vertebral subluxations in

the thoracic region may lead to pain and an exaggerated curvature of the spine — ranging from a mild roll of the shoulders to a severe “hunchback”.

Chiropractic care is rooted in detecting and correcting vertebral subluxations with gentle maneuvers called *chiropractic adjustments*.



What triggers vertebral subluxations in the thoracic region? Here is a sampling of the most common culprits:

### Improper Posture

Dr. Gravesen finds that improper posture is a widespread cause of vertebral subluxations and related middle back pain.

Poor posture works against the body’s natural stabilization, normally controlled by a balance of muscles and gravity, thus subjecting the spine to excess strain (*Electromyogr Clin Neurophysiol* 2008;48:359-65).

Many patients tend to sit in a “slumped” position, allowing the pelvis to rotate backward. A chair offering inadequate back support, a computer monitor placed below eye level, or reaching too far to use a mouse are common factors in middle back pain from sitting at work.

Dr. Gravesen guides patients to address workplace ergonomic concerns.

Attention to posture is essential for athletes as well. Runners may benefit from a gait analysis. Golfers and tennis players may benefit from a swing analysis by a professional instructor.

### Physical Stress

Repetitive work (such as typing, lifting or running items through a check-out counter), as well as repetitive sports activities (such as swinging a bat, kicking a soccer ball or lifting weights), are major causes of vertebral subluxation and related pain in the middle back.

A chiropractic evaluation for thoracic

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pain addresses how patients' work activities may put them at risk and what modifications may be necessary.

### **Emotional Stress**

Emotional stress is a significant instigator of vertebral subluxations. And, a growing body of research demonstrates that emotional stress, anxiety and depression dramatically boost the odds of developing back problems, including middle back pain.

A study performed by researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health; and the University of Pittsburgh included more than 6,000 material handlers in 160 newly opened retail stores.

After adjusting for each patient's history of back problems and work-related lifting, researchers found that the risk of back pain was moderately increased among employees with intensely demanding jobs, high levels of job dissatisfaction and stressful scheduling demands (*Am J Ind Med* 2003;43:179-87).

The doctor encourages patients to maintain a stress-reduction plan. This includes creating a schedule that keeps you from feeling rushed, getting adequate sleep and exercising each day. Also, consider practicing a stress-reduction technique, such as breathing exercises, yoga, t'ai chi, meditation or prayer.

### **Misaligned Ribs**

Just as spinal bones may become misaligned or subluxated, so may ribs.

Subluxations of the ribs often result in "trigger points" of pain, causing the smooth muscles around the ribs to spasm. Patients who complain of "knots" in their upper backs often suffer from misaligned ribs. In some cases, the sharp, jabbing nature of the pain can mimic heartburn — or even a heart attack.

Researchers point out that, although the possibility of a heart condition must always be considered when

symptoms include chest pain, after cardiovascular disease is ruled out, rib misalignments "may be the underlying cause of the symptoms in certain patients. When this is the case, chiropractic adjustment may provide an effective mode of treatment." (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2003;26:108.)

Fortunately, chiropractic adjustments are highly effective at correcting misaligned ribs. The doctor may also recommend specific exercises, which provide stability to the area.

### **Referred Spinal Pain**

All parts of the spine work in tandem. This means that pain in the middle back is sometimes the result of a vertebral subluxation in another part of the spine, such as the neck (cervical spine) or the low back (lumbar spine).

For instance, in one case study, a patient experienced thoracic as well as lumbar pain due to an exaggerated curve in the neck. When the patient's neck position was corrected, pain throughout the entire back diminished (*J Chiropr Med* 2002;1:113-5).

### **Osteoarthritis**

Middle back pain may indicate the presence of osteoarthritis (OA). This condition is also typically related to vertebral subluxations of the thoracic spine.

A chronic degenerative disorder, OA is characterized by cartilage loss: resulting in pain and stiffness. However, in its early stages, OA may have only mild symptoms, or even none at all.

In severe cases, OA of the thoracic spine results in "hunchback". Regular chiropractic care may ward off this disfiguring condition before it takes hold.

### **Mattress and Sleeping Position**

Thoracic pain that occurs at night or upon rising may be due to an inadequate mattress. Improper sleeping position may also be to blame. Both of these factors can lead to vertebral subluxations in the middle back.

Research shows that proper back support while lying down distributes the force of gravity evenly across the back, keeping the spine in a neutral position and reducing pain (*J Can Chiropr Assoc* 2005;49:96-101).

Studies also show that people who sleep on the same side each night, or on their stomachs, may be at an elevated risk of back pain.

As part of a chiropractic evaluation for middle back pain, patients are typically asked about their mattress and sleep position — and given specific recommendations if changes are in order.

### **Stop Suffering**

If you are experiencing middle back pain, there is no need to suffer. Call our office today and schedule a chiropractic evaluation. Together, you and the doctor will work to determine the underlying cause of your discomfort — and how to correct it.

And if you are pain-free, remember one ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Focus on prevention by maintaining regular chiropractic wellness visits. This will enable the doctor to correct dysfunction in your spine before pain ensues.

***Next week look for part two of this Optimal Health University™ series on middle back pain. Part two will discuss less common causes of middle back pain, the anatomy of the middle back and cutting-edge scientific research showing chiropractic care effectively alleviates this common condition.***

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