

## Back Pain

*Everyone loves to talk about his or her diseases and I am no exception. So let me tell you about my low back problem and how I cured it – by accident!*

BY MARK BICKLIN

The first time my back attacked me, I was only about 12 or 13 years old. I had taken a “set shot” with a basketball from the half-court mark, and I don’t remember if a miracle happened and the ball went into the basket, but I do remember that I had to hobble home, crippled with pain. After several more such incidents, it seemed clear that I had inherited my father’s bad back.

At 14, I took up weight lifting and concentrated on exercises for the lower back. At that point my back was still in good enough shape to respond to heavy weight lifting exercises. Throughout my teenage years, I continued these exercises. As long as I exercised regularly, my back stayed healthy and painfree.

In my twenties, I gave up weight lifting and every other form of exercise, and my back problem returned with a vengeance. About once or twice a year it would “go out” on me, and as the years passed, these episodes became more and more painful and disabling. On various occasions, I visited a chiropractor, an orthopedic surgeon and several osteopaths, finding the greatest and quickest relief with the latter, who were

able to snap my spine back into alignment whenever the occasion demanded.

During this time, several doctors recommended that I do certain exercises and I did do them – sometimes...for a while. This cycle continued for several years until I read a book called *Orthotherapy* by Arthur Michele, MD, professor and chairman of the department of orthopedic surgery at New York Medical College.

Dr. Michele explains that the underlying cause of most back problems involves an extraordinarily large complex of muscles in the lower back known as the iliopsoas. He describes it as “mainly a broad flat muscle in the lower back, but like an octopus, it has arms reaching out in many directions.” Its lower segments are attached to the pelvis, hips and thigh bones, while its upper extremities go to every vertebra in the lumbar area of the lower spine, and even up to the lower thoracic (chest) vertebrae in the mid-back.

Dr. Michele believes that 20 minutes to a half hour, twice a day, of stretching could eliminate back pain for a lot of people.

Below are some exercises that will get to the heart of many muscular difficulties. In performing these exercises, it is important to warm up gradually and do the exercises in order because the last ones act most directly on the iliopsoas itself. Always be sure to check with a doctor before starting a new exercise program.



### The Neck and Shoulder

**Uncramper** is designed to relieve cramping and pain in the neck and shoulders. Stand with your feet slightly separated in the neck and shoulders. Bend forward with your arms and head hanging loosely. Bring your arms forward, up and back

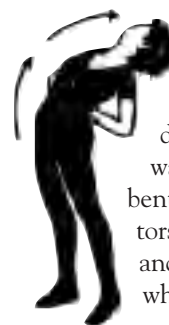


in a free-swinging circle. If it is more comfortable for you, swing just one arm at a time. Make from 50 to 300 continuous circles with your arms at least once a day.

**For an Ache in the Middle Back**, this exercise is designed to work out the muscles of shoulder blades and middle back. It also helps correct an exag-



gerated forward or backward curvature of the spine. Stand with your feet wide apart and body bent forward at the waist, clasp your hands behind you. Let the weight of your head and shoulders pull your torso forward. Now, remaining bent at the waist, lift your torso by raising your head and arching your back while pulling your shoul-



der blades sharply together. Hold this position for a fast count of ten. Then relax and let your body droop forward again. Repeat this movement 10 to 20 times whenever your upper back, neck or shoulders feel cramped, or at least twice a day.

**The Low Back Stretcher** is for stretching the low back and the hamstring muscles of the upper thighs. Sit on the floor and put your left leg out in front of you, toes straight up and then

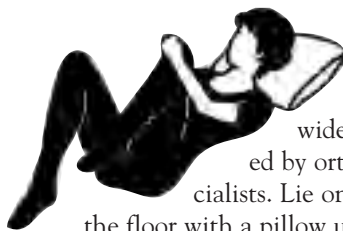


swing the leg over as far as possible toward your left side. Bend your right knee and bring the right heel close to the crotch, keeping the left knee flat on the floor and holding your left hand in the small of your back. Sit as erectly as possible, twist to the left until you're facing the outstretched left leg. Now reach out your right hand and try to touch your left toes, bending from the hips. Hold here a few seconds for a slow steady stretch, and return to the original position. Repeat and then change to the right side.

### **The Knee-Chest Stretch**

is widely recommend-

ed by orthopedic specialists. Lie on your back on the floor with a pillow under your head and your knees bent. Keep your feet about 12 inches apart. Now grab your left knee with your right hand and pull it as close to your chest as you can. Hold for a count of three, and lower your leg to the bent-knee



position. Repeat three times. Do the same with the other knee and then hold both knees together.

**Relax Your Uptight Spine** by kneeling on the floor with your knees about six to eight inches apart and bend forward from the waist, stretching your arms out over your head. Your elbows should be straight so that your forehead and lower arms and hands are actually resting on the floor. Being sure to keep your thighs perpendicular to the floor, press your chest down as far as it will go, all the way to the floor if possible. Hold it for a fast count of ten and then relax the chest but stay down there for another few seconds. Repeat as many times as you can in three minutes. This exercise stretches the hip joints, the entire spine and the shoulder muscles as well.



**For Happier Hips**, Dr. Michele says this exercise "stretches the tight hip and thigh connector muscles and increases the range of motion, thus facilitating correction of hip and thigh disalignment." Stand at arm's length from a wall with your side to it. Place the flat of your hand on the wall for support, which you should be able to do without stretching. Now, lean the hip facing the wall in toward the wall so that your whole pelvis is curved to the side. Repeat 20 to 50 times and then switch sides. If you can't do 20, which you probably can't, do as many as you can without straining yourself.



### **And Finally...En**

**Garde!** This exercise "stretches the iliopsoas and aids body flexibility and alignment," Dr. Michele comments. Get



into a fencer's thrust position, placing your right foot forward, bending your knee and stretching your leg as far in front of you as you can. Turn your right foot in slightly, but try to keep the left one pointing straight ahead, with the heel lifted. Hold your torso erect and stretch your torso backward until a pull is felt in the groin. To help balance yourself, keep your left hand on your left hip and your right hand on your right thigh. Repeat the stretch several times and then do it with the left foot forward. Dr. Michele urges doing this exercise "as many times a day as you have time and strength for."

Don't do calisthenics at all. Push-ups and chin-ups are especially bad, and trying to bend over and touch your toes with legs held straight is sheer insanity. Joining a yoga class is a very good idea. Some people make a big fuss over the kind of mattress you should sleep on. I have found that compared to the effect of stretching your muscles, the mattress is meaningless. Of possible value, though, is sleeping on your side, with your legs well bent and raised. On leg should rest on top of the other.

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