



Healing Back Pain

by Shoshanna Katzman



Over 72 million people in the U.S. are affected by back pain. Interestingly, the revised guidelines offered by the American College of Physicians in 2017 mentioned modalities such as heat therapy, massage, acupuncture or tai chi for their potential to relieve back pain. To begin with, heat therapy soothes aching back muscles by increasing blood flow, cell metabolism and connective tissue elasticity. There are various types and sizes of heat packs, hot water bottle, pads, compresses, wraps, plasters and paraffin wax treatments to choose from. Just be aware that any form of thermotherapy is contraindicated for those with impaired sensitivity to heat and inflammatory conditions. Moreover, a fresh injury or one that is already hot will not benefit from additional heat. Therapeutic massage relieves back pain by primarily manipulating soft tissues of the body with specialized hands-on techniques such as kneading, stretching, compressing, and/or gliding. It works by stimulating blood flow within the muscles, increasing nutrient exchange and removing toxins.

A hot stone massage is another option especially when back pain is caused by a muscle and/or ligament strain. It involves placement of heated basalt stones at specific body locations or moved on the skin. Heat from the stones promotes muscle and soft tissue relaxation thereby reducing muscle cramps and spasms. It increases blood flow and oxygen in the cells while releasing toxins and loosening tight connective tissues.

Acupuncture has been used for centuries as a panacea for back pain. It involves the insertion of fine stainless steel disposable needles to various depths into strategic points on the body surface.

Traditionally acupuncture relieves back pain by opening qi (vital energy) flow, balancing yin-yang energy, resolving inflammation and loosening tight muscles. Research has established that it releases natural pain-relieving or sleep-inducing opioids from the brain. Treatment speeds the relay of electromagnetic signals that begin flow of pain-relieving chemicals such as endorphins or immune system cells.

Many acupuncturists also use a heat treatment called moxibustion which involves the burning of mugwort – an herb with warming and healing properties. It is applied

above the skin in either rolled or loose form. It can also be placed on the acupuncture needle to transfer heat to specific acupuncture points.

Tai chi exercise which is a series of slow, flowing and deliberate movements is another form of Chinese medicine that alleviates back pain by releasing energetic blockages and restoring proper qi flow. It further achieves results through promoting body alignment, posture, strength, flexibility, coordination, balance and stamina. And as a gentle low-impact exercise, tai chi strengthens the spine thereby alleviating back pain. Moreover, it's focused and rhythmic breathing encourages strong and oxygenated blood circulation to one's muscles, vital organs and brain. Its meditative component dissipates worry and stress resulting in a balanced emotional state – a real plus for back pain caused by excessive stress and challenging life activity.

This gives you a place to begin your quest to find an alternative method to heal your back pain. Do your best to give these modalities the chance to work for you. You may also want to choose from additional modalities mentioned by the American College of Physicians such as spinal manipulation, rehabilitation therapy, mindfulness training, progressive relaxation techniques, therapeutic exercise and yoga. Throughout this process, stay hopeful as there are many viable treatment options available, it's just a matter of finding the one that fits you best.

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