

March 2015

Stiff Back: Not a Good Way to Start the Day



Morning back stiffness can stem from a large number of conditions, from the mundane to the exotic. In an otherwise healthy individual, it can simply be the result of **fluid accumulation in the spinal disks** during the night. This can result in stiffness or pain in the back.

Preventing morning stiffness can be as simple as changing your sleeping habits. Here are a few simple suggestions:

- **Try sleeping on your back or your side** instead of on your stomach.
- **Choose a pillow that aligns your back** more effectively. Feather and memory-foam pillows help keep your neck and back lined up at night.
- **Increase the length and quality of your sleep cycle.** Not enough sleep increases the odds of morning stiffness. If you are not getting enough sleep, discuss this with your physician.

Even if you are getting enough sleep and take care of your back and neck, you can still experience morning stiffness. This can come as a result of chronic conditions such as **rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis** or **fibromyalgia**. A recent injury can cause morning stiffness as well. If any of these apply to you, it is well worth the time and effort to see a specialist who can diagnose and treat these conditions.

There are a variety of effective treatments for morning stiffness. Application of **heat** through a compress or even a hot shower can be very helpful. Other options include **cold, ultrasound, soft tissue and joint mobilization, exercise** and **physical therapy**. In the most extreme cases, your physician may recommend surgery.

Discuss with your physician which **approach is optimal** for your particular circumstances. Then come see us. Based on your symptoms and your goals, we can develop an exercise program that will **strengthen back and neck muscles**, and increase flexibility and range of motion.

There is no one-size-fits-all treatment for morning stiffness. After consulting your physician, we will design a program that can help you get out of bed every morning with little to no pain, ready to face the day.

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Taking an Arch Look at Foot Pain



If you look at your foot from the side, you should notice an upward curve in the middle. Called an **arch**, this curve is formed by tight bands of tissue that attach at the heel and foot bones. Generally speaking, there are three types of arches: **low** (present in 20% of the population), **high** (present in 20% of the population) and **neutral** (present in 60% of the population).

If you have high or low arches, you face a slightly greater risk of foot pain. And we all know that aching feet can make you grumpy and ruin your entire day. Fortunately, there are many ways to effectively combat that increased risk.

- **Wear the right kind of shoes.** Because most of the population has neutral arches, the vast majority of shoes on the market are designed for them. If you experience foot pain when putting on a shoe, do not wear that shoe. Period. Breaking in shoes is a dangerous myth.
- **Wear an orthotic in your shoes** to help support your arches appropriately.
- **Keep yourself in shape** to prevent foot pain.
- **Lose weight** to alleviate pain in your foot.

If you experience pain in your arches, we can **determine the cause** and **chart a course** of treatment. By examining your gait, joint mobility, flexibility, strength and balance, we can determine whether you have a low or high arch, plantar fasciitis or something more significant, such as a broken bone, sprain or heel spur.

If you have plantar fasciitis, an inflammation of the band of connective tissue that stretches from the heel to the ball of your foot, we may suggest wearing shoe inserts, cushioned insoles or night splints to stretch the tendon while you sleep. Physical therapy involves **stretching** exercises of the foot and great toe that sometimes include the use of a towel or tubing, **taping** the foot, **massage** and **nonweight-bearing aquatic exercises** such as water aerobics. Local corticosteroid injections and muscle relaxants are popular but provide only short-term relief.

Regardless of the size, shape, height or length of your arch, taking good care of your feet is of paramount importance. With an early diagnosis and a successful fitness regimen, we can help relieve your aching arches and get you back on your feet pain-free.

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The Light at the End of the Carpal Tunnel



Carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS) affects as many as one in 20 Americans. It occurs when the median nerve—the nerve that controls movement and sensation in the palm of the hand, thumb and fingers—is compressed as it travels through the carpal tunnel, a narrow passageway in the wrist formed by bones on the bottom and sides, along with a ligament that forms the top of the tunnel.

The median nerve shares the carpal tunnel with several tendons. If these tendons become swollen by extensive finger use and wrist flexion, the compressed median nerve may cause a feeling of numbness or “pins and needles” in the fingers and wrist. Given the prevalence of technology in all aspects of life and the strong impact that **excessive keyboard and computer use** can have on the median nerve, the incidence of CTS is likely to increase. CTS is common in professions such as **assembly-line work** and jobs requiring the use of hand tools, especially those that vibrate. Some leisure activities, such as sewing, sports such as racquetball and handball, and playing string instruments such as the violin, can also cause CTS.

One of the most basic treatment options for CTS involves simply making a **change in posture**. Because all your joints are linked, improving your overall body posture will help keep your hands and wrists properly aligned. Avoid keeping your wrists bent unnecessarily. You should also take regular “**stretch breaks**” during your daily routines to keep your joints limber. Sleeping with a **night splint** can help reduce symptoms while training your wrist muscles to align properly.

We can develop a course of therapy to treat CTS that may include

- **gliding exercises** that move your fingers in specified patterns to help tendons and nerves move through your carpal tunnel
- **manual therapy** to release tight tendons and muscles
- **splinting** to immobilize the wrist and relieve pain

Before engaging in any lifestyle changes, consult us. We can design a program to help you avoid further injury. If undertaking lifestyle changes and exercises does not lead to the desired results, surgery may be the best solution. After surgery, a regimen of physical therapy will help you **restore flexibility and range of motion**. Make sure you have the best information and guidance possible.

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“As Seen on TV” Might Not Work for You



Many of the fitness programs advertised on television can be used safely—by some people. Those people are most likely to be young, strong and relatively free of physical limitations, injuries or recurring “problem” areas such as knees or shoulders. If that doesn’t describe you, then you should **probably refrain** from making that toll-free call or logging on to that Web site, no matter how enticed you feel by the next pitch you hear.

Some of the most heavily advertised fitness programs are designed to be **high intensity**. While for some population groups this is exactly what is needed for the quickest and most visible progress—building muscle mass, for instance—high intensity also can mean **higher chance of injury**. This is true whether you are considering high-intensity interval training, high resistance with weights or bands, or pounding the floor with high-impact dance moves.

While some television-promoted routines can theoretically be adapted for individuals who want lower-intensity workouts, your best bet, by far, for getting safely into shape is to consult us. We work with you **one-on-one**, as no television pitchman can, to design a customized program to help you meet your fitness goals.

A controlled, gradual, progressive exercise program is the key. We will help you **set reasonable goals** for steps walked or laps swum, for instance, and you will see how far you have come between week one and week 10. We can help you **understand the difference** between soreness and pain as you (literally) work out kinks if you haven’t exercised in a while. If you want to **build strength**, we will show you how to use the right equipment safely.

Whether your goal is increased fitness, weight loss, diabetes management, fall prevention or any other target in which physical activity plays a role, we will help you **strengthen your muscles** and **exercise safely**—even if we don’t have a bevy of energetic back-up dancers to help us.

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Ultrasound: You'll Like What You Hear



Ultrasound treatments have numerous uses in physical therapy, from **decreasing internal scar tissue** to **increasing blood flow** to a targeted area. Continuous ultrasound has a thermal effect on bruised, spasmed or strained tissues—it delivers heat in a remarkable way—while noncontinuous, or pulsed, ultrasound works more on the cellular level, helping to promote the flow of the cells' waste materials and increase their nourishment.

Ultrasound utilizes **sound waves**, but those waves are in a range that is inaudible to humans. In continuous ultrasound, the waves are **targeted** to well-defined areas that are identified one to two inches beneath the skin, areas that traditional heat treatments, such as a heating pad, cannot reach. Because the sound waves promote better blood circulation in the area, healing is accelerated. We often use ultrasound to help make other portions of our treatment more effective.

We can adjust various parameters of the treatment (including intensity and wavelength/frequency) to achieve the best results for your particular situation. Ultrasound therapy should feel warm, but never hot, uncomfortable or burning. Our therapists have **specialized training** in ultrasound to ensure your comfort and safety, above all.

Specific uses of ultrasound therapy may include

- **relieving the pain of carpal tunnel syndrome**
- **helping to heal calcific tendinitis** in the shoulder
- **promoting the flexibility and extensibility of “stiff” muscles** before manually stretching them
- **increasing range of motion** in joints affected by illness or injury
- **healing certain types of ulcers, bone fractures and surgery incision sites**

We would be happy to provide additional information about how ultrasound might help you.