How to Prevent Pain with Diet and Exercise

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It hurts when you get up in the morning. It hurts while you’re sitting at your desk. It hurts when you bend over to tie your shoes. From lower-back pain to nagging joint pain in the morning, many people are turning to pharmaceuticals and NSAID (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory like Advil or Motrin) instead of looking for the cause of the pain.

While many people believe that a pill can offer the answer to health, exercise and diet is most often the best medicine.

Two Types of Pain: Muscle Pain vs. Joint Pain

Muscle pain can typically be attributed to delayed onset of muscle soreness coming from a workout or performing movement patterns that your body isn’t used to performing. This type of muscle pain can last two to three days and should subside gradually. Simple stretches, massage or light exercise can help to minimize the discomfort. Muscle pain that does not result from strained movement should be directed to a physician. This may indicate a more serious condition.

Joint pain is more common. This pain alerts many people to injuries, arthritis, degenerative diseases common in the spine and other maladies. This type of pain (not caused by a trauma accident) can be prevented throughout our entire lives. Even arthritis pain can be alleviated and prevented through a combination of simple stretches and strengthening moves and an anti-inflammatory diet.

How Do You Prevent Pain?

Preventing pain is possible by attaining and maintaining proper alignment, maintaining a healthy body weight and eating a diet rich in anti-inflammatory foods.

Proper Alignment

Pain is often caused by misalignment of the body, either by muscle strength or a trauma event like a car accident or falling on the ice. When forced trauma happens to the body, surgery or stabilization is often the solution. This type of pain can be difficult to manage and may take months or years to restore the body’s natural movement patterns.

However, “day-to-day” pain, which may be chronic or re-occurring, can often be prevented. This type of pain is most likely caused by misalignment of the body by muscles pulling unevenly on the joints. Weak muscles, obesity and incorrect movement patterns are contributors to this type of pain.

The best way to prevent pain is to maintain correct alignment of the body. The simple truth is that each joint has a normal maximum range of motion. For example, the elbow should flex approximately 160 degrees and straighten. If your elbow extends beyond a straight line or hyperextends more than 10 to 15 degrees, you will dislocate and damage the bones of this joint. Many people have hypermobile joints that go beyond normal ranges. Typically, this doesn’t signal pain, but a greater potential for injury in that area. By strengthening the muscles surrounding the joint (in this case, the brachio-radialis and biceps brachii or biceps group), the joint would move in a normal range of motion from straight to 160 degrees with less risk for injury.
Understanding normal range of motion is important to proper alignment. Standing posture and gait movements can reveal much about the body’s condition and potential for injury. By simply looking in the mirror one can notice things like uneven shoulder carriage, rotation of the hips, knees rotating inward or uneven knee caps, or even if your feet point forward or out to the sides. Correct alignment would show level shoulders, toes forward and a straight alignment from the nose through the belly button, perpendicular to the floor, for best alignment. Hand position would be relaxed, with palms slightly turning forward. This “perfect posture” is made possible by the pull of the muscles on the skeleton and provides proper tension of the muscles for optimal flexibility and movement. Therefore, optimal flexibility can prevent pain and will allow maximum range of motion for the joints of the body. To better understand flexibility, check out the articles How to Improve Your Flexibility and Why Missing the Stretch May Sideline Your Workouts.

**Healthy Body Weight**

Maintaining a healthy body weight can help reduce the risk of injury and painful movement patterns. The load that is put upon the joints, especially the knees, hip and back, are constantly requiring the muscles to defy gravity and hold the body upright. Clearly, when the framework has more weight to carry, either the muscles have to be stronger to hold that weight on the frame (think of a line man in football) or the joints get compromised and crushed by it. The legs bow and the hip and knee joints become misaligned as the belly grows bigger than the pelvis space allows.

Hence, maintaining a healthy body weight can help prevent pain. Check with your doctor to see how your weight stacks up in the “normal” range, but keep in mind that bone structure, lean muscle mass and age also play a role in this equation.

To summarize, less weight on your skeletal frame makes it easier to move and keep moving.

**Anti-inflammatory Diet**

An anti-inflammatory diet is rich in fruits and vegetables, with specific nutrients that help the body’s circulatory system work optimally. While misalignment causes the body to have bone-upon-bone-causing pain, the circulatory system allows the white blood cells to rush in and help push the bones apart by leaving more fluid between the joints. The fluid cushions the joint, but also limits its range of motion (as in arthritis). **By having a diet low in cholesterol and high in fiber, and increasing our intake of nutrients like capsaicin and polyphenols, the blood can better treat an injury and reduce swelling in the joints.**

Missing any of these three components can increase your chances of injury or joint pain.

**Dealing With Pain?**

Here is a general rule of thumb for when you should seek medical consultation, whether you’re dealing with chronic or acute pain. If you have joint pain and swelling lasting for more than 24 hours without visibly decreasing size with ice, compression and elevation, seek medical attention. Also seek medical attention when there is visible misalignment of a joint (as might occur during a trauma incident).

Many physicians will also recommend taking an over-the-counter anti-inflammatory drug like Ibuprophen or Naproxyn, but simple ice, compression, elevation and rest should be your first line of action. Perform light or unweighted movement stretches of the muscles surrounding the joint after icing to increase healing blood flow as well as gentle massage.
Another option is to pay a visit to a physical therapist. Many locations will perform a complimentary injury assessment to determine if an ER visit or possible therapies to treat the pain and/or injury are necessary.

Remember, pain is not normal, nor does it have to be a lifelong expectation. Work with a trainer to develop a fitness plan and develop healthy eating habits for a lifetime of loving your body.

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