BAD BACK?

HOW TO GET BACK TO THE OUTDOORS THIS YEAR

Living in Alaska offers lots of opportunities to engage in outdoor activities which can be challenging for someone that suffers from back pain or neck pain.

Hunting can require walking on uneven ground, climbing into tree stands and hours of patience. Sitting in one position for so long, for example, can tighten and cramp up a neck or back. But there are great benefits to enjoying the outdoors. For one, any outdoor sport or activity will take your mind off your pain symptoms long enough for you to get moving. Movement and exercise can be the key to pain relief by loosening tissues, increasing blood circulation and strengthening muscles and joints to be resistant to future strain. This journal provides some advice, stretches and recommendations to help get you back outdoors and lower your risk of back strain as you get back to activity.

Preparing for your hunt

About a month in advance of your hunting trip, you need to begin to do stretches that strengthen your core and leg muscles. If your legs become fatigued, that will put more stress on your back. In addition to the exercises featured here, call Kenai Spine for a free copy of their 36-page Home Remedy Book which has many extension and flexion stretches you’ll need.

You will also need the related hunting permits. Hunting in Alaska is serious business. For one, the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADFG. alaska.gov) has strict rules and penalties related to protecting wildlife through the restrictions of hunting and fishing permits. The Kenai River, for example, attracts the world’s most avid fishermen who pay high fees for travel and lodging hoping to hook a prize king salmon weighing 50 pounds or more. But still fines and penalties await any eager angler who takes more than two salmon a day out of the water when the season has closed for that fish. King salmon season for example is limited to only a few select weeks a year related to the “salmon runs.”

For hunters, the same strict restrictions exist that limit them to specific dates for hunting seasons and which animals can be hunted and if that is a male or female. Further, the hunter can be fined if all of the edible parts of the animal are not harvested for food. Said another way, the sport of hunting must relate to saving the meat for consumption.

Hunting has had a rich tradition since the beginning of time, involving essential survival skills passed down from parent to child. While in the lower 48, most people can access their food at a grocery store. But in many remote parts of Alaska there are no grocery stores and good hunting skills are the difference between survival and starvation.

We are while conditioned to enjoy the convenience and taste of steaks or burgers purchased from the corner grocery store or restaurant, the benefits of wild game far exceed that of beef. According to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, a typical beef burger has 323 calories and 28 grams of fat. By comparison, the same portion of wild game, such as moose or deer, has only 120 calories, less than a gram of fat, and twice as much protein than store-bought beef.

In Alaska, permits related to moose hunting can help reduce the number of moose-vehicle collisions by managing an over-abundant moose population. Around the Kenai peninsula, there can be one moose-car collision a day, resulting in more than 300 moose killed annually on roads. Because a moose is the size of a horse, a car collision typically destroys the car and can hospitalize the car’s occupants — or worse.

Waste of game meat can involve serious fines or even jail time. So the hard work really starts once you’ve shot the animal. The work needed to harvest the meat can be strenuous, and the effort needed to carry out the meat can be risky for a bad back. If you plan on hunting for large game like an elk or moose you will need a friend who can help you carry the meat bags and any rack from the field. It can take three hours to dress a large game animal. Much of this time your back will be in a bent over position as you remove the hide and harvest the meat. Penalties are severe in Alaska for hunting for trophy racks without harvesting the meat. According to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the meat must be removed from the field before any trophy rack or hide.

HUNTED?

DON’T HUNT ALONE

Unlike the Lower 48, hunters in Alaska need to remember that they may be hunted as well. Bears can arrive on the scene from the smell of meat bags. Also, bears are protected in Alaska. State law specifies that a hunter is not permitted to shoot a bear that shows up to take his meat bags, but instead is limited to using a weapon in self defense. Consequently, one should never hunt alone in Alaska.
Hunting in Alaska is not for the faint of heart. A hunting trip often starts with a “fly out” in a small plane, either landing on the surface of a lake or a dirt runway. From there, the real work begins. Gear, rifles, tents, provisions and survival gear all must travel with the hunters. Here’s how to prepare for your next outing. The press up exercise below is a standard stretch that can relieve simple cases of back pain. Start on your stomach, and slowly press up as far as possible.

Avoid extension exercises if you have been diagnosed with spinal stenosis, or are over 60 years old. Never do any exercise that causes increased pain.

Hunting will require stamina and core strength, even if you have someone else do the heavy lifting.

Below: On hands and knees, raise your left arm up and out, while you raise your right leg up and back. Hold for 5 seconds and return to starting position. Repeat with the opposite arm & leg. Do 10 repetitions.

Hauling gear on a hunting trip can be the riskiest thing for your back. The most common cause of back strain is lifting something too heavy or bending at the waist. Instead, use the strength of your legs.

**Option 1:** Squat down, maneuver the object between your feet, lock the arms, keep your back straight and use your leg muscles to stand up.

**Option 2:** Start with one knee on the ground. Maneuver the object in between your feet. Raise the object with your arms up to mid-thigh, then stand up with your legs while keeping your back straight. When lifting, do not bend at the waist.

**PREVENTING A BACK STRAIN**

**HOW TO LIFT: 2 OPTIONS THAT WORK**

**OPTION #1**

**OPTION #2**
Fishing the world-famous Kenai River in Alaska is not quite the same as fishing for a two pound trout in the Lower 48. Working a thrashing silver or king salmon that weighs 20 to 60 pounds out of the Kenai River can be an exhilarating workout for the one with the rod and reel and back breaking for the person who has to lean over the boat and haul the flopping prize into the boat.

Here’s how to get back on the river:

1. **BRING A BACK**
   - This is not the time to be proud. Bring along someone with a good back, or better yet, a professional guide who can do much of the back breaking work of carrying the cooler, tackle boxes, and gear to and from the boat.
   - Saving your back is definitely worth the money. You’ll also likely catch more fish with their knowledge of the river or fishing spots. If you are the one with a bad back, it’s best to bring on board a person with a good back to work the net and haul in the fish.

2. **USE BODY MECHANICS**
   - Remember correct body mechanics on how to lift, by using your legs for raising the object (fish, tackle box, cooler) rather than bending at the waist with your back.

3. **GO LIGHT ON YOUR BACK**
   - Hauling a king salmon over the side of the boat is like reeling in a child, as the photo above of Dr. Humphreys with his prize king salmon next to his daughter clearly shows. You can still have fun fishing for a lighter catch. Fishing from the shoreline eliminates the heavy lifting and still provides plenty of outdoor enjoyment.

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**BACK TO SKIING**

1. **AVOID IMPACT**
   - Skiing is a great way to enjoy the Alaska outdoors. It’s a great workout that gets blood circulating through your body, it burns calories and helps you keep weight off. The biggest risk of **DOWNHILL SKIING** is from falling or impact with a tree. If you do downhill skiing, wear a helmet and control your speed. Cross country is certainly a safer way to ski, and can burn a lot of calories as well.

2. **PREPARE YOUR LEGS IN ADVANCE**
   - Skiing is most demanding on your legs. So it’s crucial to prepare your legs in advance. Knee bends are a favorite skier exercise to prepare for the slopes.

3. **KNEE BENDS**
   - A person with weak legs will typically use their back as a crane to lift, which inevitably leads to back strain. With skiing, you use your legs for balance and to lessen your risk of falling. Strengthen your legs with this standard exercise for skiing: the Deep Knee Bend. If you need to, start with two chair backs on either side of you to assist.
   - **RIGHT:** With arms outstretched for balance, lower down into a squat, hold for one-to-two seconds and then return to starting position.
Understanding your back or neck pain symptoms

It's important to understand what may be causing your back pain. For example, 80% of back pain is related to strain of the muscles in the back. The other 20% of back pain can come from disc-related problems. How do you know the difference? Disc-related problems create symptoms that radiate pain or numbness into the leg or arm.

"Make no mistake, a back strain can be excruciating and drop you to your knees," explains Craig Humphreys, MD. "While a disc problem in the back is more serious, the symptoms are typically felt in the leg. This may be treated with drugs or spinal injections to reduce inflammation on the nerve root.

Weakness or numbness in the foot are emergency symptoms that need to be seen within a week to prevent these symptoms from becoming permanent.

So while watchful waiting can be used for radiating pain in a leg or foot, that is NOT the case with numbness or weakness in a leg or foot. Even disc problems can benefit from movement," explains Dr. Humphreys. "Studies have concluded that for rehab of injured tissues you need movement to get circulation and nutrients to the disc and ligaments in the back.

"The second common byproduct of back strain can be depression. Back pain can prevent a person from engaging normal recreational activities, or it may knock them off their job, all of which can raise stress.

The longer a person is off the job, the more they worry about losing their job which in turn affects their financial security.

Back pain if not addressed promptly can create a disability spiral. It can seem like a formidable journey back to work, let alone activities like golf or tennis, but the journey back to activity often starts with taking the first step off the couch.

WHEN SHOULD YOU GO TO THE DOCTOR FOR BACK & NECK PAIN?

WHAT DO YOUR BACK OR NECK SYMPTOMS INDICATE?

Many back or neck problems can improve on their own or with non-surgical treatment. However, some symptoms represent emergencies and need to be seen immediately by a spine specialist to prevent permanent nerve damage.

PAIN IN THE ARM: Pain that radiates into an arm below the elbow can imply a herniated disc in the low back. But many times radiating pain can be treated non-surgically. Radiating pain should be seen by a spine specialist within 2 weeks.

Numbness/tingling/weakness in arm/hand: Numbness or tingling in the arm or hand is a more serious symptom that is NOT appropriate for watchful waiting. Left untreated, the symptom can become permanent. You should see a spine specialist within 5 days.

PAIN IN THE LEG: Pain that radiates below the knee can imply a herniated disc in the low back. But many times radiating pain can be treated non-surgically. Radiating pain should be seen by a spine specialist within 2 weeks.

Loss of bowel/bladder control: This is an emergency symptom that needs to be treated immediately by a spine surgeon within 48 hours. If you experience these symptoms at night or on the weekend, go to the emergency room. If not treated quickly, the person may lose control over their bowel and bladder permanently.

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PAIN LIMITED TO THE NECK: Neck pain can be caused by traumatic injury, like whiplash from a car accident, or muscle or ligament strain. See our Home Remedies section on our Internet site if pain persists beyond a week, you should see a spine specialist to determine the underlying cause.

PAIN LIMITING THE LOW BACK: Pain that is limited to the low back can often be a result of muscle strain. While pain spasms can be excruciating, muscle strain problems do not require surgery. See our Home Remedies section on our Internet site for special stretches that can relieve pain, and the proper use of anti-inflammatories. However, if pain persists beyond a week, it could imply something different than muscle strain, and you should see a spine specialist to determine the underlying cause.

Foot drop/weakness in foot: If pain, weakness or numbness extends into the foot so that you are unable to lift your toe as you walk, that is called Foot-drop, which is an emergency symptom. You need a spine specialist within 48 hours. If not treated promptly, it could lead to permanent weakness in the leg.

Understanding your back or neck pain symptoms

It’s estimated that 80% of back and neck pain symptoms will go away on their own over six weeks with some special exercises. However, some problems require emergency symptoms and need immediate medical attention to prevent permanent neurologic damage. Here’s what to do sooner or later to avoid some dangerous symptoms.

Any symptom that does not improve over three days is a signal to seek medical attention. If you have any emergency symptoms, be sure to contact your spine specialist when calling for an appointment.

THE HARRY HUMPHREYS BOOK

People can request the Kemai Spine 30-page Home Remedies book through the web site at KemaiSpine.com. Stretches like the one shown below can actually relieve simple cases of back and neck pain.

When pain

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Dr. Craig Humphreys takes Kenai Spine to Kenya to provide free spine surgery for those in need.

Throughout Dr. Humphreys’ career, he has looked for ways to give back to patients and the communities in which he has served. Over the years, Dr. Humphreys has also found great personal satisfaction providing free spine care, knowledge, and expertise to patients suffering from back and neck pain in countries like India, Lucia, Lithuania, and China. He has also had a long track record of supporting many local events that benefit the underprivileged. In fact, Kenai Spine is working with 12 separate charitable organizations in the Soldotna community by donating time and money in support of their programs.

In 2012, Dr. Humphreys and his family traveled to Kenya on a medical mission trip with the World Medical Mission organization, where they each volunteered to provide health care to a much-needed area of the country. World Medical Mission was established in 1977 to assist general surgeons who wanted to volunteer for short-term mission trips in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, Oceania, and the Middle East.

Dr. Humphreys and his family enjoyed their trip so much that they returned in January of 2014 with the hopes of finding a local hospital with which he could partner to provide spine care for the benefit of the underprivileged in Kenya, East Africa. As in 2012, Dr. Humphreys was able to utilize his 20 years of experience as an orthopedic spine surgeon to assist local doctors to treat patients suffering from orthopedic-related pathologies, while his family volunteered many hours of service working in the pediatric ward of the hospital providing comfort and relief to the many children admitted there.

While in Kenya, Dr. Humphreys also visited hospitals known for providing quality healthcare to the underprivileged in Kenya, and was able to identify a hospital just outside of Nairobi with which he can partner to build a quality spine program designed to educate local orthopedic residents and young surgeons, and ultimately provide affordable spinal health care to those suffering from neck and back pain.

Upon return home from Kenya, Dr. Humphreys and the team at Kenai Spine organized a committee whose job it will be to plan and execute a return trip to that hospital in Kenya where spine patients can receive advanced spinal health care. The Kenai Spine team plans to head back to Africa in January 2015.

“A project of this magnitude requires significant planning and participation by many people and organizations who are willing to donate their time, expertise, medical instrument and equipment for the benefit of the underprivileged in Kenya," explains Craig Wilcox, executive director of Kenai Spine. Wilcox continues, “This is something Dr. Humphreys feels strongly about. He believes that he should give back to not only the Alaskan community where he grew up, but also play some role in helping those in the poorest areas of Africa who suffer from spine problems, and who would never otherwise benefit from the pain relief provided by spine surgery. We are fortunate to be able to assemble a team that is capable and willing to carry out Dr. Humphreys’ vision.”

Kenai Spine Mission Statement:
“We at Kenai Spine find fulfillment in serving others and we believe that life is a miraculous gift. For this reason, we dedicate a significant portion of our time and efforts to improving the lives of the underprivileged in Alaska and developing countries.”
WHEN SURGERY IS NECESSARY

Minimally invasive spine surgery shortens incision, speeds recovery

Minimally invasive spine surgery has evolved over the last 30 years to address a variety of spinal disorders including herniated discs, spinal deformity, injuries, fractures and degenerative disc disease. Some spine surgeons have been quick to adopt this new minimally invasive technique along with the equipment needed, as it presents many benefits to the patient.

With that said, there are some surgeons who are more comfortable doing traditional back and neck surgery because of the time involved to be trained and experienced in minimally invasive spine surgery. Consequently, a patient needs to be well informed about the options available to them currently and to select a surgeon who is able to use the new instrumentation involved with minimally invasive spine surgery. A patient should ask if a minimally invasive approach will be used, the length of the incision involved, and the length of time in recovery after surgery.

Compared to a three-inch incision in traditional spine surgery, a surgeon performing minimally invasive spine surgery can access the spine through a small hole the size of a dime to allow a special endoscope to be inserted. At the end of the scope is a camera with a video feed to a TV screen, enabling the surgeon to view the surgical area through the scope. A minimally invasive tubular retractor (MITR) is used to gain access to the spinal column. The device goes through a small keyhole in the muscles of the back, reducing damage to the spine. By contrast, traditional open back surgery pulls the muscles away from the spine which disrupts the tissue causing more discomfort after surgery.

Minimally invasive spine surgery reduces the hospital stay, reduces pain, results in less blood loss during surgery which can lessen the need for donated blood and the risks inherent in that. A smaller incision can often translate into a faster return to work and activities, and less chance of infection than traditional open back surgery. The portals are left in during the entire surgery to allow specially designed surgical tools to move freely into the patient’s spinal column and not to damage the soft tissue from exiting and inserting equipment. When the portal is removed at the end of the surgery, the surrounding soft tissues slowly fall back into their normal place and a small amount of stitches are needed to close the area.

The new O-arm provides the most advanced surgical navigation tool

Central Peninsula Hospital in Soldotna was the first hospital in Alaska to install the most current surgical navigation technology — the O-arm. O-arm® Surgical Imaging allows the surgeon fast access to real-time 3D high quality images of a patient’s anatomy which greatly helps during complex spinal and orthopaedic procedures. This technology allows the surgeon to perform less invasive procedures that are easier on the patient’s recovery time.

Another plus side for the surgical staff is the O-arm reduces X-ray exposure, increasing safety for both operating room staff and patient. The surgeon has a wide variety of imaging choices with how he wants to view the patient with the O-arm imaging techniques. A section of the patient is scanned by the O-arm and then the surgeon can manipulate a 3D view on a screen to more accurately perform the operation. The system also provides three two-dimensional cross-sections for a different view.

“It is particularly important when you are doing minimally invasive surgery, when you are trying to keep the incision really small,” explains Dr. Humphreys. “The O-arm enables the surgeon to see exactly where he is and navigate to the exact level of the spine.”

Dr. Humphreys was already familiar with the new technology as he had used it in his previous spine practice in Tennessee.

Clinical Outcome Report Card

New patients coming to Kenai Spine completed an intake form that measured their pain level, severity of symptoms and functional status. Three to six months after their first visit, an outside nurse — not associated with, or employed by the clinic — called a random sample of these patients and interviewed them for functional status, current symptoms and patient satisfaction. This is the most unbiased, statistically relevant method for clinical outcomes.

The results of the Clinical Outcome Report Card show that Kenai Spine receives at its front door the most complex patient base in the region. One of three new patients had back surgery previously at other spine clinics. But even with the most complex patient base, Kenai Spine averaged near 90% in satisfaction across the seven categories measured.

Patients also demonstrated improvement in pain symptoms and functional status scores. Kenai Spine is the only spine center in Alaska credentialed by SpineCenterNetwork.com.
Back outdoors

For the past seven years, Frank and his wife Deborah have operated a popular brewery and bar in Alaska. For Frank, work in the brewery often involved some heavy lifting and a lot of standing. Frank first noticed an onset of low back pain several years ago. He first thought the pain symptoms were simply the result of his work and active outdoor lifestyle in Alaska, which included frequent fishing trips. As the years went by, however, Frank noticed his back pain worsen to the point he felt weakness and numbness in his left leg. “This January it became so bad that my left leg pretty much stopped functioning,” notes Frank. “I had a lot of numbness in my left leg and it scared me a lot.”

His physician referred him to Kenai Spine. At the spine center, diagnostic tests revealed that Frank had spinal stenosis, which is a narrowing of the spinal canal that can commonly occur as one ages. Unfortunately, the non-surgical treatment options for stenosis are limited as bone crimps the nerves in the spinal canal. “Any time we see numbness or weakness in a leg or arm, these are very serious symptoms,” explains Dr. Humphreys, who did the corrective surgery of a decompressive laminectomy and foraminotomy to enlarge the narrowed canal and relieve the symptoms.

“Numbness and weakness typically means the nerve root is being cramped, and left untreated, Frank could have permanent numbness in his leg which would affect his ability to walk.” Fortunately, the necessary surgery is fairly simple and the results can be dramatic. “From the first visit, Dr. Humphreys and the entire team at Kenai Spine have been great,” Frank remembers. “He is an incredibly on-time person in the clinic, and I never had to wait. He made sure everything was right. My pain is now almost nil. I’m able to walk places and distances that I was unable to walk over the past couple of years. “Dr. Humphreys and his staff have been so exceptional. With Dr. Humphreys and his staff, there’s no hurry. If I have anything that I want to discuss further, they take the time to make sure that I am taken care of.”

Frank is now back on the job — and back to fishing for recreation.

PATIENT SUCCESS STORY

Diagnosis: Severe spinal stenosis with bilateral leg pain
TREATMENT: Decompressive laminectomy and foraminotomy

“You have to be on top of these things,” Dr. Craig Humphreys, who did the corrective surgery, said of the treatment. “The team at Kenai Spine have been great,” Frank remembers. “He is an incredibly on-time person in the clinic, and I never had to wait. He made sure everything was right. My pain is now almost nil. I’m able to walk places and distances that I was unable to walk over the past couple of years.”

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To read more Back to Life success stories, go to KenaiSpine.com and click on Patient Success Stories to see video and print stories about Alaskans getting back to activity.
ABOUT THIS EDUCATIONAL JOURNAL:

Kenai Spine is a multidisciplinary center of excellence for the treatment of back and neck problems. Kenai Spine believes quality healthcare is a byproduct of a well-informed healthcare consumer. To continue to receive this educational journal, go to our educational internet site at www.KenaiSpine.com for a free subscription.