

One of the joys of living in the mountains is being surrounded by trees. They are beautiful to look at, help clean the air, and provide habitat for the wildlife we enjoy. They keep us cool in the summer, paint our landscape with brilliant color in the fall, and provide us with fuel during the winter. Unfortunately, they also provide us with ample opportunity to injure our backs.

Autumn is the time of year when we stack wood and rake the leaves. Every year we see people in our office who have had significant back or neck injuries from each of these activities. However, there are things you can do to prevent these injuries.

The most common of these injuries is the strain. A strain is defined as an injury to a muscle. By definition, when a muscle is strained, it has been torn. While the tissue tear (or strain) will heal in six to eight weeks, the consequences of this injury can be more protracted than that. When strains heal, they heal with scar tissue. If they are not properly rehabilitated during the healing phase, this tissue can be much less flexible than before the injury. The muscle is also much more susceptible to re-injury.

Another common injury is fasciitis. Fascia is an interconnected soft connective tissue that is throughout the body. It surrounds and penetrates all components of the body. This web of tissue weaves through and around all our muscles helping to maintain their physical integrity and providing support. It also helps to absorb shock and provides the necessary environment for injured tissue to be repaired. When fascia is inflamed it is referred to as fasciitis.

Fascia can become inflamed from over use or an inadequately rehabilitated strain. This is the classic “weekend warrior” syndrome. Fasciitis causes burning and aching pains and significantly degrades your quality of life. Over time, sufferers will even develop weakness in the involved area, largely from disuse.

These injuries do not occur in a vacuum. When you have a strain or develop fasciitis, it affects the amount of power these muscles can generate. This, in turn, leads to improper joint movement due to the imbalance in the forces between the muscles on both sides of the joint. Chiropractors refer to this phenomenon as a “subluxation” or as “joint dysfunction.” When this occurs, the joint surfaces will be out of alignment or have unequal pressure across them. This can lead to early degenerative change in the joint causing or worsening arthritis. This joint dysfunction is also the cause of most chronic back pain.

A facet injury is another common injury seen in over lifting and from bending at the waist incorrectly. This is a situation where the spinal joint becomes injured and inflamed and can cause pain not only in your back, but can also radiate into the buttock and thigh. In extreme cases when the joint is severely inflamed it can also irritate a nerve root and cause pain to radiate into the leg and foot that is often mistaken for a herniated disc.

The herniated disc is less commonly seen but is the more severe and leads to the greatest disability. They usually produce severe back and leg pain. Disc herniations are usually

seen in cases of over lifting, especially when twisting and bending at the waist with straight knees. It is important to note, however, that disc herniations also occur while performing mundane tasks as well. I have seen patients who had disc herniations and attribute them to bending to pick up a paper clip, bending to use a hammer, and reaching into their trunk. Just as a heart attack is not the result of that last greasy burger you ate, but rather the lifetime of poor eating habits and lack of exercise; disc herniations are not usually the result of a single insult to the spine. They are usually the result of improper lifting and bending of many years duration.

There is a lot you can do to prevent these fall injuries. Lift properly by keeping objects close to your body and keeping your back straight while lifting with your knees not your back. When raking leaves, be sure to keep the rake close to the body and not to bend too far forward at the waist. If your back is telling you it is tired, listen to it. Take a break and let the muscles relax for a while. Stay well hydrated and drink plenty of water while working this fall. Slowly build into your work. Don't try to get it all done at once. And be sure to stretch when you are done. Lying on your back and pulling your knees to your chest can do a lot to relax your muscles and prevent pain the following day. If you do have an injury, see your chiropractor as soon as possible and don't let a simple problem become a life altering one.

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