

Smoking & Back Pain



There are many reasons to quit smoking. The negative effects of smoking are well documented and very well publicized. What many people don't realize, is the negative effect of smoking on the health of the spine. Three disease processes related to the spine is impacted by smoking:

1. Disc nutrition and health

Discs in the spine act like sponges. The adult disc has no blood supply and the way the disc receives it's nutrition is through movement. During movement, the small blood vessels at the edge of the disc provides the necessary nutrients to keep discs healthy. Studies are now showing that when nicotine (the toxic chemicals associated with smoking) is in the blood stream, these little blood vessels become smaller and eventually disappear. This means the disc gets less nutrition and degenerates faster than normal. The bottom line: Smoking is directly related to disc degeneration.

2. Nerves and blood supply

Smoking also has a very negative effect on nerves. It is estimated that all of the nerves in the human body takes almost 1/4 of all the blood in the body: Nerves love blood. Smoking has been linked (like above) to smaller blood vessels around nerves and even blood vessels "dying." This decreases blood flow to nerves and this may then cause nerves to become more painful (screaming for blood) and not respond well to normal, traditional treatment methods.

3. Bone growth

Any spine surgeon would tell you that patients who smoke have poorer healing of bones after surgery. In a surgical process called spinal fusion, surgeons often use bone or other metallic devices to stiffen up a spinal level, to decrease unwanted movement. In smokers, it has been shown that the time it takes for new bone to grow into that area is slower. This can also potentially lead to the bony fusion not growing together at all.

There are obviously other negative effects of smoking on general health, especially the lungs. This information may be helpful in your process to consider stop smoking. It may also give you an explanation why you may not respond as well to treatments such as injections, physical therapy or just healing slower.

If you are interested in quitting smoking, we urge you to ask your medical doctor for additional help.

For more information - ask your Physical Therapist

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