

## Back Pain and the McKenzie Method

By Andrew Clarke, PT

The McKenzie approach to back pain is a very popular treatment regiment used by physical therapist around the world. Robin McKenzie, a physical therapist in New Zealand, founded this method in the 1960's. He found that moving certain patients with back pain into extension helped to reduce back pain. With the McKenzie approach, the spine is extended to help "centralize" the patient's pain by moving it away from the extremities (leg or arm) to the back. The theory of the approach is that centralizing the pain allows the source of the pain to be treated rather than the symptoms.

Often The McKenzie method is just thought of as a set of exercises that are preformed in the clinic or home. While the McKenzie approach utilizes certain exercises to assist in relieving back pain, not all exercises are for all back problems. A physical therapist that is trained in the McKenzie method will perform an evaluation to determine if the pain stems from a "Mechanical vs. Non- Mechanical" source. Mechanical refers to pain that increases or decreases with different body positions or motions. Non-Mechanical pain is often due a systemic problem and does not respond to positional changes or body movement.

Once pain is determined to be of the Mechanical origin, then it is classified into one of three classes:

- Postural syndromes - pain caused by continued stress of soft tissues while maintaining certain postures or positions. Pain is stopped when correct posture is assumed.
- Derangement syndromes - pain caused by a change in position of the vertebrae causing the fluid of nucleus in disc to reposition or impinge on other structures; pain will change with repeated motion.
- Dysfunction syndromes - intermittent pain and limited movement caused by the presence of scar tissue in a shortened state; pain occurs when these tissues are stressed.

The most common classification is the derangement syndrome.

Your physical therapist will then provide you with postural education, pain reducing strategies and an exercise program designed to encourage centralization.

There are many exercise routines that help to relieve back pain. The following exercises are a few that are incorporated in the McKenzie approach. In general, they are repeated up to 30 repetitions or until there is a reduction in your symptoms. As always, use good judgment. If you find that your symptoms are worsening, stop the exercise and consult your doctor or see a physical therapist for skilled guidance.

**Prone Position:** Lay on your stomach. (You may place 1-2 pillows under you waist if you find this position too uncomfortable to tolerate. As this position becomes more comfortable reduce the number of pillows until you are able to lay flat.)

**Prone on Elbows:** Rise up on elbows as high as possible, keeping hips on floor. Hold for 1-2 seconds and repeat.

**Prone Press Up:** Press upper body upward, keeping hips in contact with floor. Keep lower back and buttocks relaxed. Hold 1-2 seconds and repeat.

**Standing backward bending:** Arch backward to make hollow

of back deeper. Be sure to keep both knees straight and hands on hips. Hold 1-2seconds and repeat.