

ORANGE PEEL

September 16, 2009

BY: JOHN HOFMAN, CSCS, MS

Sacramento Fire Department
Training Division

PAIN IN THE BACK?

Let me take you through a typical conversation I have had with a firefighter who has back pain:

Me: How are you today Bob?

Bob: Not too good John, my back is killing me!

Me: Why is that Bob?

Bob: Well I am getting old and “so and so” says it’s hereditary. Plus this job will get you over time.

Me: Yea Bob, firefighting is tough on the body. Have you done anything to help your back?

Bob: Blah Blah Blah (doesn’t really matter what is said because it usually involves the Dr, med’s or other a chiropractor.)

Me: Ok Bob, do you workout?

Bob: Yea man! I do crunches and back bends and the rotary machine for my core. I need to protect my back by working out my abdominals and my ability to twist under load because I need to strengthen my core.

I would say half the firefighters I have worked with started training with me because they wanted to workout without hurting their back. I am by no means an expert on the subject, however, there are a few things I am certain of:

1. Back pain is rarely caused by back injury.
2. Strengthening or stretching the painful area will usually exasperate the symptoms.
3. Those with back pain think they have a back injury; back injuries are the result of a global dysfunction and cannot be linked to a singular cause.
4. Those back pain have very little margin for error when working out; the slightest error in exercise prescription can be disastrous.
5. The one definitive sign of progress that seems universal is gluteal soreness post workout.
6. Those with back pain have generally devised their own rehab program that has, in fact, made the problems worse.
7. Postural faults are not always related to back pain. However, with those who do have back pain, when those imbalances are corrected, function improves and pain decreases.

Some important points to understand when educating on back pain.

1. Back pain vs. hip dysfunction. Even though dysfunctional hips are not the sole culprit of back pain, they are major component of it. Back pain is also a result of excessive mobility of the muscles that stabilize the lumbar spine and inefficient mobility of the muscles that control the hips. When the hips stop working, the lumbar spine compensates for movement, and because it was not designed for this function, damage and pain occur.

2. If you don't believe me, try using the foam roller and roll your glutes out. You will probably notice some tightness in your glutes and probably the cause of your pain. I would recommend using a foam roller to help with your back pain.

3. Training is multi-dimensional. Once again, most people believe they need to isolate muscles by either stretching or strengthening: *"I need to stretch my back and strengthen my abs"* It is actually about improving the function of the body as one unit. Some muscles need to be stretched, some need to be strengthened, some muscles need both, some require neither, and it all has to be integrated with the rest of the body.

4. There is no QUICK FIX! Depending on how serious the injury is, some firefighters will have to invest at least 3 months of training to correct their problem. People have to understand that 20 years of firefighting will not be corrected in 3 weeks. Re-teaching the body how to work properly takes time, patience, and education.

Next article will focus on some corrective exercises to help with your back pain.