Doctors Suggest Holding Off on Meds to Treat Chronic Back Problems

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Suffering from chronic back pain? You should try nondrug treatment options, such as massage, yoga or stretching, according to new guidelines from the American College of Physicians (ACP) published in the latest edition of the Annals of Internal Medicine. This is because these alternative treatments are safer than most pharmaceutical remedies and help many people feel better faster than if they popped a pill for the pain, Fox News reports.

Chronic back pain—defined by doctors as pain that's lasted for more than 12 weeks—is one of the most common reasons people in the United States visit doctors each year. In fact, recent studies show that about a quarter of American adults said they suffered from lower back pain at least one day during the previous three months.

Doctors based their recommendations on findings that showed non-pharmaceutical remedies, such as exercise, acupuncture, mindfulness-based stress reduction, tai chi, yoga, biofeedback, cognitive behavioral therapy or spinal manipulation, worked better for people with chronic low back pain than drug-related options.

"Most back pain is self-limited," said Nitin Damle, MD, MS, assistant professor of medicine at the Alpert Medical School at Brown University and president of the ACP. "It's common [and] will go away given enough time, and patients can help themselves initially by trying some heat and stretching before going to see a physician."

If these solutions don't work, the ACP suggested treating pain in your back with over-the-counter non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or NSAIDs, such as ibuprofen (and not acetaminophen). Additionally, doctors can prescribe medications, such as duloxetine (Cymbalta) or tramadol (Ultram), to stop the hurting, according to the updated standards.

Most important, the guidelines stressed that opioids should be considered only as a last resort to relieve recurrent back pain and prescribed in small doses taken as infrequently as possible after doctors have discussed their risks and benefits with patients.

Click here to learn more about the health risks and side effects of taking opioids for chronic pain.

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