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Back Pain in the Athlete

Low back pain is a very common complaint, in the general population and athletes are no different. The majority of people will experience back pain at some point in their life. The vast majority of cases are self limiting, meaning they resolve within a few weeks with very simple treatment. In most cases these are the result of overuse or muscle strains. Treatments include relative rest, though prolonged bed rest is not recommended. The use of heat, ice, massage, and a course of anti-inflammatory medication can also be very useful.

Although simple mechanical back pain is most common, other causes are possible. Associated symptoms can be a flag for something more serious going on. Back pain associated with fevers/chills, weight loss, pain at night, or night sweats should prompt further evaluation by your healthcare provider.

Another concerning finding would be back pain associated with signs of nerve compression. This may be the result of spinal injury or a problem with one of the intervertebral discs, causing pressure on a nerve. In these cases the symptoms may include loss of bowel or bladder control, pain radiating down one or both legs, and feelings of numbness or weakness in the feet or legs. If any of these symptoms are encountered, they would warrant further evaluation.

Lower back pain in the athlete not relieved by simple treatments as described above should be evaluated. Spondylolysis is a condition resulting in a small bony defect in a particular portion of the vertebrae. This usually occurs in the lower back, and has been found to be more common in athletes who engage in certain repetitive motions, such as gymnasts, football lineman, and dancers. Diagnosis of this condition is usually possible with X-rays, but may include further testing like a bone scan or CT scan. Treatment can range from rest and possible use of a brace, to in some cases, surgery.

Overall, back pain is a common and most often easily treated problem. By following some simple treatment recommendations, and watching for certain “red flag” symptoms, most athletes will be able to minimize time away from sports, and know when to seek further evaluation.

Dr. DeWall specializes in all aspects of sports injuries, knee and hip surgery. To reach Dr. DeWall or to schedule an appointment at DMOS – West please phone 515-224-5224. Dr. DeWall also provides satellite clinic services at Clarke County Hospital in Osceola, IA.