What is the McKenzie Approach to the Treatment of Low Back Pain?

Eric Jorde, DPT, OCS, Cert. MDT

Many Physicians prescribe “McKenzie treatment” when referring a patient to physical therapy for spinal pain. “McKenzie exercises” are often mistakenly associated only with back bends or spinal extension exercises. “McKenzie exercises” are also commonly associated for treatment primarily of discogenic spinal pain. If you have prescribed the McKenzie treatment for your patient, did you know that this treatment approach has some of the best research to support the mechanical diagnosis and treatment that will be used by the Physical Therapist?

The McKenzie approach is a comprehensive spinal assessment for patients with “non-specific” LBP. This approach utilizes a well defined clinical algorithm to classify patients into a mechanical syndrome. Placement into a mechanical syndrome is based on a “cause and effect” relationship between the patient’s history as well as the patient’s symptom response to repeated test movements, test positions, and auxiliary tests during the assessment process.

There are three mechanical syndromes in the McKenzie approach: Postural Syndrome, Dysfunction Syndrome, and the Derangement Syndrome. Each mechanical syndrome will respond to a different treatment approach. Patients that fail to enter one of the three mechanical syndromes are tested by a series of auxiliary tests. Patients that commonly enter this category are patients diagnosed with sacroiliac joint pathology, spinal stenosis, or myofascial pain syndrome.

Symptoms of the Postural Syndrome are caused by a prolonged stretch on normal soft tissues. The patient’s symptoms are relieved once the prolonged stretch is released and no soft tissue damage has occurred. The primary treatment of this patient population deals with postural correction and patient education.

Symptoms of the Dysfunction Syndrome occur at the end range of the patient’s range of motion due to abnormally shortened soft tissues. The most common reasons for abnormal shortened soft tissues in this syndrome are scarring, fibrosis, and joint hypomobility. The patient’s symptoms in this mechanical syndrome respond to stretching, joint mobilization, joint manipulation, and patient education.

The Derangement Syndrome is comprised of patients that suffer from anatomical disruption or displacement within a motion segment. This disruption of the motion segment causes an obstruction to movement and results in LBP and possibly lower extremity pain as well. This disruption most commonly occurs within the lumbar intervertebral disc. Patients that fall into this mechanical syndrome commonly display a phenomenon known as centralization. Centralization is the resolution of extremity pain in a proximal direction and resolution of LBP by applying an exercises or manual therapy to reduce the joint displacement.

Ultimately, the goals of the McKenzie approach are the resolution of the patient's current condition and the prevention of future episodes. The prevention of future episodes is accomplished through patient education regarding the causative factors of their condition and a highly individualized home exercise program to manage their symptoms. Physical Therapists trained in the McKenzie approach can help physicians in the management of patients with nonspecific LBP through patient education, individualized treatments and prevention of future episodes.

Eric Jorde is a Physical Therapist who is certified in the "McKenzie Method" and is the Clinic Director at Southeastern Physical Therapy's Chesapeake Office located at 680 B Kingsborough Square in Chesapeake and Spine Rehab and Aquatic Center located at 905 N. Battlefield Blvd in Chesapeake.

Reference:

www.mckenziemdt.org