

Oh, My Aching Back...

And what you can do about it



by Jerry Zelm, D.C.

You've spent the last several days in a flurry of activity getting ready for the show. Reaching, lifting, bending, packing, shoving, sitting for hours during travel, standing in awkward positions while unpacking, setting up your booth, walking back and forth on uneven ground. Perhaps you've even been subjected to extreme temperature changes—wind, rain, drafts.

In any case, you're finally done. You've certainly earned a few moments of relaxation, so you reach for a cool (or hot) drink, plop yourself down in a foldout or canvas chair, slump back, stretch out your legs, and survey the efforts of your labors.

Now it's time to get up and greet a prospective buyer. But you can't move! Pain shoots through your back, your legs and your shoulders. You look and feel like a chick trying to peck its way out of an egg as you struggle to get up and out of your chair.

Here is what's going on: Those musculoskeletal problems from your past have just come back to haunt you again...in spades. Old, forgotten injuries, some from childhood, have a way of returning when you least expect them, especially at times of physical and emotional stress. The cause? Previously injured and weakened muscles and joints that were never completely healed or fixed (by a chiropractor or osteopath) following that fall, car accident, or slip onto your backside. Vertebrae (bones that stack on top of each other and make up your spinal column) were knocked out of place and started irritating nerves that exit the spine through little openings called foramen. This irritation transfers pain to muscles, ligaments and tendons of the surrounding area. Given time, the nerve pressure can even affect internal organs—causing a myriad of health problems.

How do you avoid the above scenario? There are many options to consider, however, here are the most common:

- Due to the extreme physical and often emotional stress accompanying the artist's vocation, I would suggest that you periodically engage the professional services of a chiropractor or osteopath. An occasional deep massage can also be very beneficial.

- Develop a daily exercise regimen that includes both aerobic exercises, such as walking or jogging, and stretching exercises.

- Know your weight limits. Whenever possible, get help when an item is too heavy (this is a good reason to bring along your significant other or a friend).

- Use proper lifting techniques. The safest and best lifting method includes spreading your feet far apart (like a sumo wrestler or a football linebacker) and keeping the object close to your body during the lift. Lift like an elevator, not like a crane.

- Avoid prolonged sitting. Get up and move around at least every 20 minutes and stretch every now and then.

- If you are staying at a hotel or motel, ask to check out the bed before you decide to take the room. If the bed is a loser, it could cost you a lot of future discomfort.

- Take your own pillow with you. Some of those travel pillows can give you a backache and a headache.

- Most importantly, get yourself a professional show chair that is ergonomically correct and comfortable, too. Many artists are sitting on chairs that do not match or support the natural curves of their body. Prolonged use of these chairs can cause joint pain and damage and actually ruin your posture. The extra cost of a chair with good ergonomics will pay for itself in the long run, while providing you with comfort during those long days at the show.^{TCR}

