

NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE

BUSINESS TRAVEL; A Long Trip, a Crammed Flight and a Lingering Pain

By PERRY GARFINKEL

When pain knifes the lower back, sufferers will do anything to find relief, especially when they are on the road and unable to turn to the doctors and therapists who minister to them back home. In their desperation, they sometimes discover treatments they never knew existed.

Bradley C. Nordheimer stumbled into what he now considers a near-miracle remedy on a business trip in September to Carlsbad, Calif. During a five-hour flight, Mr. Nordheimer, a vice president of Teleconferencing Services in Washington, tried every stretching trick in the book to ease the discomfort caused by a herniated disk, but to no avail.

"Flying is always very uncomfortable for me," he said, "but on this trip, for no apparent reason, the pain got worse and worse." By the time the plane landed, the pain was shooting from his neck to his lower back.

When he arrived in Carlsbad, he went directly to a spa at the Four Seasons Resort Aviara and spent \$155 on a 50-minute treatment he had never heard of. The treatment, called Watsu, is a variation on shiatsu massage that takes place in warm, shallow water. Supported by leg floats, the weight off his vertebrae, he had what he described as an "almost out-of-body experience."

"I haven't done hallucinogenic drugs, but it was what I imagine it'd feel like on them," Mr. Nordheimer, 38, said. Now, he checks a Web site listing Watsu practitioners in the United States (www.waba.edu) whenever he travels.

Business travelers who live with back pain, whether acute or low-level, chronic or intermittent, are legion. In a paper published in November in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, a group of researchers said the condition was the second most commonly reported pain, after headaches. And the National Pain Foundation, which provides a toll-free number (866-590-7246) to help callers find professional help in their area, says at least half of working-age Americans are plagued by back problems.

Business travelers know too well that their condition can be worsened by two seemingly antithetical activities: moving and not moving. Racing through airports dangling bags and laptops on one's shoulders, then hoisting them into the overhead compartments, can strain the hardiest backs. But sitting motionless for hours, cramped in car or plane seats while already taut muscles stiffen even more, can also take a toll.

"Our bodies are troubled by static positioning," said Steven Katz, a Mill Valley, Calif., chiropractic orthopedist who treats a number of Marin County business executives who travel frequently. "The principle to keep in mind is movement trumps pain. When your brain gets the signal of motion, that signal overrides the pain message."

He urges business travelers who fly to book aisle seats to make it easier for them to get

up and stretch their legs and those who drive to make frequent exercise stops.

Though scientific studies on the connection are sparse to nonexistent, "business travelers anecdotally report that flying puts them at a higher risk of back episodes," said Walter F. Stewart, the lead author of article in the the medical association journal and an epidemiologist who directs the Center for Health Research and Rural Advocacy at Geisinger Health System in Danville, Pa.

He and others suggest taking precautions before, during and after trips. Before setting out, they say, travelers should do exercises that strengthen the muscles in the legs, shoulders, stomach and back -- all of which work to support the spine.

The exercises, called core trunk stabilization, involve lying face up on the floor or using oversize rubber therapy balls and assuming a "lumbar-neutral spine position," keeping the back flat and relaxed, said Celeste Criswell Randall, an orthopedic and physical therapist in Encino, Calif. Through a series of isometric and flexing stretches, like pressing legs, arms and lower back into the ground, practitioners train their muscles to bend, move and twist.

Some doctors also suggest taking an aspirin or anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen before a trip to prevent inflammation and to aid circulation by thinning the blood. To treat intermittent rather than acute pain, Dr. B. Todd Sitzman, the medical director of the Center for Pain Medicine in Hattiesburg, Miss., suggested 600 milligrams of ibuprofen three to four times a day.

A strained trapezius has forced Meryl Pearlstein, the president of MDP Publicity in Manhattan, to pack strategically. "I eliminate anything unnecessary," she said, even her laptop, making sure hotels where she stays have business centers. She distributes the weight of what she does carry -- work bag, purse, small suitcase on wheels -- evenly between both arms and shoulders.

Lavinia Plonka, a Feldenkrais movement therapist in Asheville, N.C., said that while standing in lines for airport check-ins or for car rentals, people have a tendency to lock their knees, which thrusts the stomach out and sways the lower back, causing undue strain.

To counter that, she suggests, bend your knees slightly and tuck in your pelvis. "This lengthens the extensors in your back and it invites the whole spine to relax," said Ms. Plonka, who produced a CD titled "Have a Comfortable Flight! Simple Exercises to Stay Flexible While in an Airplane Seat."

Once on board, travelers must endure several hours in a seat that was "not designed well in the first place," especially for those with back problems, said Alan Hedge, professor of ergonomics at Cornell University. The majority of coach seats -- he singled out JetBlue and Southwest as exceptions -- have no adjustments for lumbar support, he said. Also, he said, the tops of the seats push the head forward, forcing the body into an awkward

posture, and the armrests are uncomfortably hard.

And with airlines cramming more seats into the same space, there is less legroom and little wiggle room, he said.

He offered several tips, including simply getting out of the seat during the flight; wedging a pillow between your lower back and the seat back to support the lumbar; and placing a bag under the seat in front of you and using it as a footrest.

At the hotel, if the back pain is acute and feels like a stab, Dr. Katz said, ice the affected area for not more than 20 minutes at a time. If the predominant feeling is tired, stiff and tight muscles, treat it with heat for 30 to 40 minutes. ThermaCare, a Cincinnati company, produces a lightweight heat wrap (\$6.99 for two single-use Velcro wraps) that travels well and does not make you smell like a Chinese herb shop. It contains discs made of iron, charcoal, salt and water that, when exposed to oxygen, heat up in 30 minutes and last about eight hours.

Of the various types of massage that can help ease pain, Dr. Katz recommends reflexology, an approach that treats the nerve endings that meet on the soles of the feet. Bill Furlong, of Arlington Heights, Ill., a reflexologist and board member of the Reflexology Association of America, said that the bony instep from the tip of the toe to the heel correlates to the entire spine (cervical, thoracic, lumbar, sacrum, coccyx). Applying pressure up and down that area with one's thumbs for about five minutes will ease spinal pain, he said.

Those who find a method that works become zealous believers in it. Disappointed by "a closet full of expensive lumbar supports," Martin Held, who suffers from a degenerative neuromuscular disease, tried an inflatable pillow his physical therapist recommended. Called Pocket-Pillow (\$17.95), it has one chamber of air set within another. He found it so effective that he tracked down the inventor and licensed its manufacturing and distribution rights.

"I don't go anywhere without it," said Mr. Held, 63, president of Courtesy Service Products in Mill Valley, Calif.