

## THE LAST HOPE FOR SERIOUS SPINE CONDITIONS

A San Francisco spine surgeon is giving people with serious back problems a new lease on life. Dr. Kenneth Light takes the cases many doctors don't want or consider beyond treatment or hope (approximately 20 percent of his patients are seniors), patients like these:

\* Seventy-three year old Gregory noticed pain while playing golf. The pain continued and became so great he couldn't walk a block or stand without difficulty. He had surgery In 1991 and is now playing 18 holes of golf, swimming and walking again.

\* A Bay Area TV reporter who suffered from two years of leg pain. Dr. Light removed scar tissue and ruptured disk material from her spine. "I'm really thrilled," she says, "I'm grateful everyday that I don't suffer from back pain anymore. I'm back at work, I play tennis, lift weights at the gym and am pain free."

These patients are a challenge, but Dr. Light thrives on challenge. "The greater the risk, the greater the reward," he believes. "When you can return a person who had given up hope to their normal lifestyle, the expression on their face provides immense personal satisfaction."

In an age when many doctors rely on technology for diagnoses, Dr. Light believes the time a doctor spends listening to a patient is the most important part of the process. "We're not treating MRI scans, we're treating people," he says.

Over 80 million Americans suffer from back pain, but only one in 10,000 actually needs surgery. Before choosing to operate, Dr. Light uses a battery of nonsurgical techniques, including exercise and physical therapy.

When he does operate, he is often correcting failed surgeries that have been referred to him. The results are often dramatic: People with spinal cancer can be stabilized, bedbound patients can walk again, people whose lifestyles have been drastically altered can resume active lives. "Although not all patients can be helped, we are happy to evaluate each one, and many can be restored to an active life."

Dr. Light calms patients' fears with information - and credentials. In 1984 he was selected for a fellowship at the State University of New York at Buffalo with Dr. Edward Simmons, one of the most well-respected spine surgeons in the world and creator of the Simmons Keystone Technique and osteotomy of the spine for ankylosing spondylitis. Osteotomy of the spine, which few surgeons perform, provides a safe, efficient way to treat this severe spinal deformity. After training with Dr. Simmons, Dr. Light began taking the most difficult cases. He found good results with both spinal osteotomy and the Keystone Technique.

The Keystone Technique decompresses and stabilizes the cervical spine, allowing the surgeon to remove tumors and fracture fragments, and removal of painful disk herniation. The success rate is 90% and patients are ambulatory the next day.

To expand treatment for back pain sufferers, Dr. Light and Dr. Roger Minkow founded the San Francisco Spine Center at Saint Francis Memorial Hospital. The Center offers a complete range of services, including education and preventative medicine.

To extend treatment to more patients, Dr. Light and Dr. Roger Minkow helped start a spine center in Amarillo, Texas, based on the San Francisco model, and is helping Dr. Simmons' facility in Buffalo. The centers will be linked by computer networks to share treatment information and track results. Dr. Light believes, "every patient has the right to the best medical treatment possible."

## BACK TALK

Most damage to the back occurs as the result of poor posture, improper body mechanics and weakened or inflexible muscles. You can protect your back from injury by incorporating common sense guidelines into your daily life.

Before embarking on any exercise program a proper diagnosis will help to guide the therapist to determine what types of exercises are appropriate for you and your condition.

**MUSCLE STRENGTH:** Back pain is usually caused by weak or inflexible muscles surrounding the spine. Targeting only the back muscles, however, is not enough. It is important that you strengthen the abdominal, arms, legs and buttock muscles so that they can do the work of moving and lifting, so your back doesn't do the work.

**FLEXIBILITY:** Tight, inflexible tendons and ligaments are injury prone, so it's essential that you use stretching techniques to maintain flexibility, especially before and after any workout.

**EXERCISE CAUTION:** Choose low-impact exercises that don't jar the back. If you jog, do it on soft surfaces with shock-absorbing running shoes. When walking, do not swing arms vigorously or twist the upper body. Swimmers should maintain good posture in the water; the backstroke puts less tension on your back than crawl.

**STANDING UP:** Standing up straight reduces stress on the spine. Keep your head high, chin slightly forward shoulders back, stomach muscles tight. If you stand in one place for long periods, shift foot positions often, or put one foot up on a step.

**CHAIR:** Avoid sitting crooked, sitting on stools or anywhere without back support. Ergonomic chairs are a good investment because they provide the support you need for long periods of time at a desk or computer. If the chair does not support your lower back, use a tower or small pillow. Avoid tucking legs under the chair, or dangling them off of a chair that's too high. They should be flat on the floor or on a footrest. Use armrests that are adjustable, it takes pressure off the back, shoulders and arms. While typing, be sure your arms and wrists are level and that you don't have to reach up, down or forward to touch the keyboard.