IS EXERCISE WORTH THE PAIN?  If exercise is good for us, and simple activities such as walking, light lifting, and stretching are supposed to be safe, why do they hurt?  By Rhett Polka, DPT, OCS, MAT, CSCS

How many times have we heard someone complain of pain during or after exercise? Whether it is shoulder pain after throwing, foot pain while walking, back pain from weight lifting, or knee pain during sports, exercise is usually accompanied by discomfort. Nearly two and a half million people suffer sprains and strains annually while participating in recreational exercise. There must be a reason why these “safe” activities are resulting in pain and injury.

We have all been told at one time or another that starting an exercise program would help us lose weight, become a better athlete, or recover from an injury. It sounds like a good idea, but what if our exercise plan is actually reinforcing weakness and making us breakdown? This is not just a possibility, but is actually what is happening when we feel pain during activity. The old adage of “no pain, no gain” should actually be “no gain with pain.”

Much like your car, your body has a “check engine light” that goes off when there is a problem. It is pain. The longer you drive with the check engine light on, the faster your car will breakdown. The same is true with your body. If you try to push through pain, or mask it with medication, braces, ice / heat, etc. you will continue to breakdown just like your car. It will eventually get to the point where you can no longer do what you like to do, or you will suffer an injury. The sooner you assess and treat the cause of pain, your chances of breaking down will greatly diminish.

Pain and orthopedic injury is a direct result of joint instability. All joints are stabilized in some part by muscle, ligament, joint capsule, bone, and cartilage. Of these tissues, muscle is the only one with contractile properties. For this reason, muscle is the primary stabilizer of all joints. If a muscle loses its ability to contract on demand, stress is then transferred to the connective tissues. Inappropriate stress placed on these tissues can lead to an acute injury (ankle sprain, whiplash, or an ACL tear), or chronic joint breakdown (hip and knee osteoarthritis, heel spurs, or herniated discs). The key to avoiding these injuries is to make sure muscle is activated prior to starting an exercise program.

Bring up the topic of exercise, strength training, or speed training and the first questions people ask are “how much weight have you lost”, “what do you bench” or “what’s your 40”. Nobody asks the most important question, “how is your stability?” We have become a performance driven society where building a strong foundation is regularly sacrificed for putting up impressive numbers. This type of thought process is tearing us down before we can actually build anything up.

Bill Wright, head coach of the University of Arizona men’s tennis team for the last 18 years, has seen many athletes breakdown before they could ever meet their full potential. “Every year I would see these phenomenal freshman athletes, football and basketball players, arrive on campus. They would start working out harder and harder, and keep getting hurt over and over, until they had nothing left. Two to three years later, they would be finished. They focused so much on overall strength and big numbers that they forgot about building a sound base.”
To avoid breaking down while playing sports, exercising, or just doing things around the house, you must have good joint stability. The best way to assess this is to visit a Physical Therapist who is a Certified Muscle Activation Techniques (MAT) Therapist. They will be able to test the strength and stability of every joint, from your head to your toe. This will give you the proper foundation to build your new pain free exercise program.

The bottom line: everyone from active seniors to little league athletes need stability. Maintain a stable base and you can avoid pain and injury during the activities that you love to do. So the next time your check engine light goes off during or after activity, call your MAT Physical Therapist and get your stability back.

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**Indicators of Joint Instability…**
- Swelling
- Lack of motion
- Numbness or tingling
- Muscle tightness or spasm
- Pain during or after activity
- Wearing orthotics or motion control shoes
- Need to use a brace (knee, ankle, back)