

Indicators of serious problems elsewhere – don't ignore hip pain

By Paula Shingler, BSc, MCSP

Most people don't even think about their hips - except the width of them perhaps! When pain occurs the hips suddenly become very important. The hip is a large area that has the hip joint as the focal point. This is one of the major weight bearing joints of the body and the stress on it can be up to 5 times an individual's weight when walking or running- a considerable amount. Hip pain is very often not the joint itself but related to the structures surrounding it. Anatomy time.

Basic anatomy lesson first

The hip joint is a ball (the head of the thigh bone) and socket (part of the pelvis) joint. The ball articulates in the socket propelled by the many muscles surrounding it. There are muscles to pull forward (quadriceps), back (hamstrings), outwards (abductors) inwards and rotating inwards (adductors) and rotating outwards (glutei). It's a complex system to allow movement. The joint itself is encompassed by strong ligaments with a thick fibrocartilagenous labrum under this to cushion and protect the joint. Many bursa or fluid filled sacs also are tucked round the joint and between tendons and muscles to give added cushioning. Phew –lesson over and so it is time to get onto the injuries.

Hip pain from trauma

Trauma, when you trip and fall giving immediate pain, is much

easier to diagnose and treat. With a fall you could have torn muscles or tendons, strained ligaments or if it's been a bad fall you could have torn the labrum. Soft tissue damage is usually easy to diagnose and responds well to the usual rest, ice, gentle stretching and gradual resuming of activity. Labral tears are not so easy. If you find that initially you recover well but are left with the occasional catching in the joint with pain increasing with increasing activity then it needs to be checked out properly. If left, it can cause more irritation, wear and tear and arthritic changes due to abnormal rubbing in it. Diagnosis is done by MRI scan and it may need surgery to repair the tear-EEK! This is the worst case scenario but it is good to be aware that niggly pain should not be ignored as it can potentially lead to further damage if left.

Gradual hip pain

Gradual hip pain can be much harder to diagnose and much more frustrating. The symptoms can be tendonitis, bursitis (irritation and inflammation of the bursa) thigh pain, groin pain, aching at night, pain after activity but not during- all very frustrating and can be caused by a variety of problems.

- Poor core stability i.e. weak abdominal muscles- this can mean that the hip drops down rather than being supported
- Biomechanical imbalance- my old friend the tightly

strapped ankle can mean that the natural flexibility is restricted and this impacts all the way up the leg to put abnormal forces on the hip. Also knee problems can impact on the hip too.

- Low back problems can give referred pain to the hip, thigh, knee and groin
- Osteoarthritis- gasp! Yes it can happen to us all and can cause night aching and stiffness in the morning but relatively little symptomatically during the day.

As usual, accurate diagnosis is essential. Treatment can only be effective if you know exactly what the problem is. Treating the symptoms may initially help, but unless the true cause is isolated it will recur. Pain in the hip can be an indicator of a more serious problem elsewhere and should not be ignored. Just remember your hips are not just a measurement and should be appreciated!

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