

The Pandemic is Stressing Our Bodies in New Ways

Don't be afraid to seek medical help when the body signals "something's wrong," say the specialists at **Princeton Brain, Spine and Sports Medicine.**



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As the stay-at-home orders around the region began to lift, the specialists at Princeton Brain, Spine and Sports Medicine noticed a pattern emerging.

"I've been seeing a lot of people who, under normal circumstances, would have come in sooner for an evaluation," says neurosurgeon Seth Joseffer, M.D., FAANS, FACS. "Their hands are going numb, or they're experiencing severe pain when they try to walk. In some cases, it's so bad, they haven't been able to walk for a couple of weeks."

While all of Princeton Brain, Spine and Sports Medicine's locations remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many people have limited their outings to grocery shopping. But pain, whether it's new or chronic, shouldn't be ignored.

"If someone's experiencing pain, it's really important for them to have it evaluated because if it's left unattended, it could develop into irreversible nerve damage," says Mark R. McLaughlin, M.D., FAANS, FACS, founder of Princeton Brain, Spine and Sports Medicine. "Nerves are the body's alarm system. Pain is their way of signaling something's wrong. But, over time, that alarm's going to become quieter and quieter until it finally

stops sounding altogether."

Be especially mindful of neck pain that radiates to the arms and hands, and leads to numbness or weakness and back pain that radiates to the legs and leads to numbness or weakness, says Nirav K. Shah, M.D., FAANS, FACS, Princeton Brain, Spine and Sports Medicine's medical director.

Those who have seen their exercise routines derailed may be experiencing a range of aches and pains that stem from a loss of neck and core strength and diminished muscle tone overall, according to Dr. Joseffer.

"Exercise is a powerful natural pain reliever and antidepressant," Dr. McLaughlin adds. "Removing it from the equation can significantly increase both."

Regardless of whether you're experiencing neck or back pain or a sports injury related to a decrease in activity or starting back too hard, the sooner the intervention, the greater the likelihood that the treatment will be less invasive than if you put off having it looked at, Dr. McLaughlin says. The recovery should also be quicker.

If you're hesitating out of fear of being exposed to the virus, know that the team at Princeton Brain, Spine and Sports Medicine

appreciates your concern. Early on, each location adopted a number of measures intended to facilitate social distancing and ensure a clean, sterile environment.

"We've done our best to remain open with the proper precautions throughout the pandemic," Dr. Shah says. "Consequently, we're well suited now, as the restrictions lift, to treat patients through both in-person visits and telemedicine."

While much of everyday life is now tinged with a low-level anxiety, the key is managing it, says Dr. McLaughlin, who authored a book titled *Cognitive Dominance: A Brain Surgeon's Quest to Out-Think Fear*.

"It's a human condition," he says. "Everyone has it. It never goes away. But easing back into your routines can help keep it in check." ■

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