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A s s o c i a t e s

## True Weakness or Injury Weakness?

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It is a common experience that people who have pain find their muscles weaker than they should be. This weakness can result in a lessening of function, whether in activities of daily living, recreational activities, or something as fundamental as balance. Full functioning is essential for our muscular system, when one muscle underperforms it could shift undue stress on other muscles that share the workload and ultimately lead to further pain. Unfortunately, the symptom of weakness has two potential causes which are treated quite differently.

One source of weakness is simply lack of use. Muscles, like people, are developed to full potential by challenge and activity. Exercise encourages a muscle to perform at a level that extends the boundaries. Stress, in this way, is a very good thing.

My wife and I just returned from Napa, CA where we toured many vineyards. A vineyard is the perfect analogy: give the grapes ample rain, nice warm temperatures, and rich soil and you will produce a really crappy wine. Stress the vines with poor soil, very little moisture, and make the vines work hard to survive; the result is a wine of deep, rich character. (The same seems to be true in people. . .)

Another source of weakness is specific injury to the soft-tissue, such as a trigger point in a muscle. New MRI studies show that specific low back and neck muscles with injuries and trigger points will lose up to 25% of their size in less than two weeks after the injury.

Normally, when weakness is present, the answer is strengthening through exercise. When the source of weakness is injury, further stress only increases the pain. These injured muscles can barely function in daily living; specific exercise only pushes the muscle farther past its already weakened capacity. The result will be an increase in pain and symptoms instead of an increase in strength. One symptom; two very different causes. The treatment for true weakness will make injury weakness even worse.

If you feel that your muscular health is not as strong as you need, determining the source of the weakness is vital. One simple way to determine the source of weakness is to try doing very specific but gentle exercise. If you notice gradual improvement, keep doing it! Conversely, if every time you exercise symptoms worsen, there is probably an injury in the tissue that should be addressed.