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Back to Basics

A holistic approach to neck and back pain helped Jennifer Palmer regain her quality of life

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back to basics



Eugene Alexander did not have to resort to pain medications, thanks to the holistic approach of Rachel Hallmark, MD, PhD.

A holistic approach to neck and back pain helps patients regain their quality of life

Eugene Alexander, a 57-year-old grandfather of 12 from Port Republic, Virginia, had visited multiple doctors to address his chronic back pain issues before seeing Rachel Hallmark, MD, PhD, of the Augusta Health Spine Clinic. Once he met with her, he noticed a difference right away.

“I was seeing other doctors, and I really wasn’t getting the relief I needed,” says Alexander. “I came to Dr. Hallmark and found out they were treating the wrong issue in the wrong area [of my back].”

Alexander suffered from lower back pain caused by dysfunction and malalignment of the sacroiliac joint — where the spine connects to the pelvis — and irritation of the muscles and tendons in this area. After Dr. Hallmark provided her diagnosis, Alexander received injections into the joint as well as trigger point injections, which are intramuscular injections similar to dry needling that relieve muscular pain and spasm. Dr. Hallmark is one of the only providers in the Augusta County area currently offering this service.

“[One of my symptoms was] I couldn’t bend backward,” Alexander says, “and the first time she gave me those trigger point injections, I was able to bend backward without any pain at all. I gave her a big hug [after that], and now every time I see her I give her a big hug.”

These injections, in combination with physical therapy, also allowed Alexander to experience relief without resorting to pain medications. As a recovering alcoholic, he appreciates Dr. Hallmark’s more holistic approach to back pain and its treatments. Under her care, he has now received treatment not only for the back pain that initially brought him to the Spine Clinic, but also for additional chronic pain affecting his neck and shoulders.

In addition to Alexander’s treatments, Dr. Hallmark and the Spine Clinic provide other types of injections, such as joint and bursa injections, additional medication management if needed, and treatments for problems that go beyond back and neck pain. These problems include other sources of pain in the legs and arms, as well as conditions with functional impairments that do not involve pain, such as brain injuries and strokes. Dr. Hallmark also performs electromyography (EMG)/ Nerve Conduction Studies, which help to diagnose nerve damage, and can be helpful in certain situations of pinched nerves.

Broad-Based Focus

“What distinguishes our practice is we tend to focus more broadly on the musculoskeletal system,” says Dr. Hallmark. “[Without this broad approach], things can be overlooked in terms of the muscular and other non-surgical sources of the pain. I rely pretty heavily on physical therapy to treat many conditions, and I’ve worked with physical therapists both at Augusta Health and throughout the community. I’ve gotten to know their unique skill sets, and I can help get patients into the right type of treatment for their condition.”

While Dr. Hallmark assists with management of pain in many cases, the patients that are most appropriate for her care are interested in increased function



Jennifer Palmer found relief through a variety of pain-management solutions.

and being able to do more with their bodies and their lives, rather than exclusively controlling the pain.

“I’m not necessarily trying to cure something, but I am trying to contribute to enhancing patients’ quality of life,” Dr. Hallmark says. “If I have a patient who has had a stroke and they’re having weakness, I may not be able to cure that weakness, but my goal is to make that patient as functional as possible. I want to help people be as active in their lives as they can with the kinds of things that are important to them.”

This focus on quality of life means that the treatment goal is different for every individual, and can range from being able to walk to the bathroom without assistance to performing at a high level in sports.

Return to Function

For Jennifer Palmer, a 41-year-old IT specialist from Lexington, Virginia, seeing Dr. Hallmark helped her get back the function she needed. Her treatment plan involved physical therapy and trigger point injections, and pain management in the form of muscle relaxers and anti-inflammatory medications.

“My muscles were so tight, I couldn’t move,” says Palmer. “Brushing my hair, picking anything up and even driving was really painful. I sit at a computer at work all day, so it was making work difficult.”

Palmer initially visited her primary care provider and was referred to Dr. Hallmark after her PCP saw her X-rays and became concerned. At her first visit, Dr. Hallmark diagnosed her problem and explained the recommended treatment course.

“After that [visit] she had a plan of action, [which was] a combination of physical therapy, muscle relaxers and — a month later — trigger point injections,” says Palmer. “A year and a half later, I’m still doing that, and I can brush my hair!” ❧

Providing Prosthetic Help

In addition to treating neck and back pain and other musculoskeletal issues, Rachel Hallmark, MD, PhD, at the Augusta Health Spine Clinic, has also started a clinic for amputees that currently meets once a month. During these clinics, Dr. Hallmark joins with a local prosthetist and physical therapists to evaluate and treat patients that need or already use prosthetics.

Julian Flesher, a 51-year-old from Staunton, Virginia, attended one of these clinics and is now treated by Dr. Hallmark for nerve pain and phantom limb pain due to his amputation below the knee. He is happy with the progress he has made with Dr. Hallmark.

“When I call and need to see her, they treat me very well,” he says. “Her staff is outstanding. It’s a challenge, but I’m feeling better now. Overall, I’m just pleased with the [positive] outcomes I’ve had with her.”



Rachel Hallmark, MD, PhD

Learn more about the Augusta Health Spine Clinic at augustahealth.com/spine-clinic.