

Coccyx pain: Pain at your Tailbone

by Dr. Laura Rampil

Have you ever fallen on your tailbone? If the answer is yes, you know the disabling pain it can cause. Falls, hits to the coccyx or a difficult delivery of a baby are the most common causes of coccyx pain or coccygodynia. It hurts to sit, stand, go to the bathroom, cough and sneeze or have sex. The coccyx is made up of a few small bones at the end of the spine. It sits above the anus. The ligaments that hold the coccyx in place attach up to the sacrum (the base of the spine) and become part of the membranes that go all the way up the spine to the base of the head. The muscles that attach to the coccyx also connect to the muscles that control the anus and vagina or base of the penis. Because of these attachments, it is not unusual to have pain with urination, moving your bowels or during sex. The coccyx is also one of the areas the Gluteus maximus attaches. This big muscle defines your buttocks and allows you to walk.

Why does it hurt so much when it gets hit? It is a very sensitive area with many nerves. It breaks easily. And it is a direct link to the sympathetic nervous system, the flight or fight system. In part of the population, it is the one place in the body that that connects both sides of the sympathetic chain. The sympathetic chains are little bundles of nerves that are spaced out along each side of the spine. The sympathetic chain controls most of the body's organs during stress and help balance those organs during times of calm.

Typically in medical school doctors learn to treat a fractured or bruised coccyx (found on x-ray or CAT scan) by telling a patient to sit on a doughnut pillow, take anti-inflammatory medicine like Ibuprofen, or a take a sitz bath. If that didn't work and the patient kept complaining, they are offered an injection of numbing medicine and a steroid directly at the tailbone. This may or may not help. If all else fails, the coccyx could be surgically removed.

As a manipulating Osteopathic Physician, I was taught a very different approach to helping people with coccyx pain. With my hands, I assess the position of the coccyx and if there are signs of a dislocation or fracture I too verify this with x-ray or CAT scan. Many times there is more than just a bruise even if there is no fracture.

Everything hurts! The coccyx can be repositioned with gentle manipulation. But like all fractures, the force that goes through the tissues isn't limited to the bone that breaks. Pain can come from many other sources. Spasms of the effected muscles, sprains to the ligaments that attach the coccyx to the sacrum or the ligaments to the pelvis itself can be strained from the impact. Many times the sacroiliac joint has pulled out of position creating stress on the ligaments. The strain to the pelvic bowl can pull on the tissues that make-up the pelvic floor. This sheet of muscle attaches to the coccyx and to the insides of the pelvic bones. The anus, vagina and urethra are tubes that pass through this sheet. If

there is pulling on the muscle sheet there can be pressure and affect the functioning of these tubes. That is why you can have difficulty with urination, moving your bowels or sexual function after a coccyx injury.

Pulling on ligaments stimulates pain fibers to activate the pain pathways and release pro-inflammatory proteins. Now you have pain and swelling. Both the pain and swelling can be reduced with a combination of Osteopathic treatment, herbal and/or pharmaceutical medication. Topical anti-inflammatories both natural and synthetic can be applied. Instead of the famous doughnut, there are new pillows that help support the pelvis and muscles of the pelvic floor without putting pressure on the coccyx itself.

Even my head hurts! Sometimes that impact travels up the spine and a person can be whiplashed and develop neck pain or headaches. The sympathetic nervous system can get over stimulated from a coccyx injury. This too will be addressed and treated with Osteopathic Treatment of the bones, nerves, joints, membranes, fluids and energies of the body.

Many people who have long standing and recent coccyx pain as well as pelvic floor pain can be treated with an integrated approach by an Osteopathic Physician that is certified in Osteopathic Manipulative Medicine.

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