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LAKERS

Many can empathize with Kobe Bryant's back spasms

Back pain is one of the most common medical problems and will affect about eight out of 10 people during their lifetimes.
By Jonathan Abrams and Alan Zarembo
Los Angeles Times Staff Writers

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It was the tweak felt around the Southland.

As Kobe Bryant writhed and wrenched through lower-back spasms during the Lakers' playoff loss against the Utah Jazz on Sunday, it was an injury with which many across California and the country could empathize.

Back pain is one of the most common medical problems and will affect about eight of 10 people during their lifetimes. Of course, not many of them have quite as large an impact on the Lakers advancing in the playoffs.

Describing himself as sore, stiff and tight, Bryant left no doubt Monday he would play in Game 5 on Wednesday, although he did label his back injury as something new.

While most who experience back pain feel muscle spasms during simple routines, such as leaning over or sleeping, Bryant said his play was most affected while trying to jump. That was painfully obvious in overtime Sunday when Jazz forward Andrei Kirilenko twice blocked Bryant's shot.

Bryant suffered the first back injury while taking a shot early in Game 4. He played 46 minutes despite obvious pain and had to turn sideways to lift himself off the court.

"I tried to play and make drives to the basket where I could kind of withstand the pain without the back completely spasming and then put the next game really in jeopardy," Bryant said.

On Monday he addressed reporters while standing, as he did during Sunday's postgame news conference. Bryant said he would receive round-the-clock treatment.

His regimen includes ice, heat, massage and stretching. Bryant also held his electrical stimulation device by his side, saying he would basically sleep with it the next couple days.

The machine resembles an old police scanner and costs \$2,700. It delivers a current of up to 35 volts through four electrodes placed on the skin. The current contracts the muscles, increasing blood flow to the area to help recovery and it's also thought to help block pain signals to the brain.

Dr. Nick Shamie, a spine surgeon at Santa Monica UCLA Medical Center and Orthopaedic Hospital, said low-back spasms could be anything from a minor muscle strain to a deeper tissue injury that causes the surrounding muscles to protectively clench up.

"The fact that [Bryant] was able to play the whole game tells me it's not anything very serious," he said.

On the bench during Sunday's game, Bryant received ice packs to reduce inflammation and electrical stimulation to relax the muscles.

In highly conditioned athletes such as Bryant, surrounding muscles can take over and speed recovery.

"This kind of injury could definitely put somebody in bed for a day or two," Shamie said.

For most mortals with back problems, the normal chores of life such as picking up a grocery bag or a baby can trigger another spasm. "It's a pretty amazing athlete willing to play through that kind of thing," said Steve Moffit, a physical therapist in Salt Lake City and an admitted Jazz fan.

Moffit cringed when he saw the ill-fated jump shot early in the first quarter that triggered Bryant's injury.

"You hate to have the best player go down," he said.

Of course, another thought crossed his mind: "You're thinking, if Kobe Bryant's going to be hurt, that's going to help our team."

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