Healthy Back: Your Back is Always Working

HEALTH ACTION GUIDE

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, low back pain is the second most common neurological problem in the United States. Only headaches are more common. It is also the most common cause of job-related disability.

WHY BACK HEALTH MATTERS

Maintaining good back health is important for several reasons:

- Your back is the main support structure of your entire body.
- Your back allows you to move, sit, stand, bend and bear weight.
- Due to its finely balanced structure, your back can be easily injured if not cared for properly.

Knowing the basics of back care and taking action to prevent the most common causes of backaches may mean freedom from pain and strain.

It's estimated that four out of five people will experience back pain sometime during their life. If you don't want to be sidelined with backaches, it's good to know that back pain is largely preventable.

BACK PAIN TRIGGERS

Are there things in your life that increase your risk for developing back pain or strain? Check off the back pain trigger(s) that apply to you:

- ☐ Inactive lifestyle
- ☐ Being overweight
- ☐ Overexertion in work or play
- ☐ Poor sitting or standing posture
- ☐ Improper lifting, bending or reaching
- ☐ Poor sleeping posture and/or pillow positioning
- ☐ Sleeping on a mattress that is sagging, too firm or too soft
- ☐ Staying in one position too long
- ☐ Carrying a heavy handbag, briefcase or backpack
- ☐ Stress
- ☐ Smoking

PREVENTIVE BACK CARE

To build a better back, you'll need the right basic tools:

Good diet.

Good posture.

Regular exercise.

A positive attitude.

There are several things you can do to minimize or prevent back pain and build a stronger back:

- **Exercise regularly for total body fitness.** Include a balanced routine of cardio (aerobic) exercise, weight training, stretching, and core stabilization to help build endurance, strength and flexibility.
- **Progress gradually towards fitness goals.** Be realistic about your activity choices. Don't be a "weekend warrior."
- **Use correct posture** and proper body mechanics in daily activities. (See section on Posture Pointers.)
- **Achieve and maintain a healthy body weight.** Excess weight—especially around the waist—places an extra burden on the spine. Being overweight also makes back problems more likely to reoccur.

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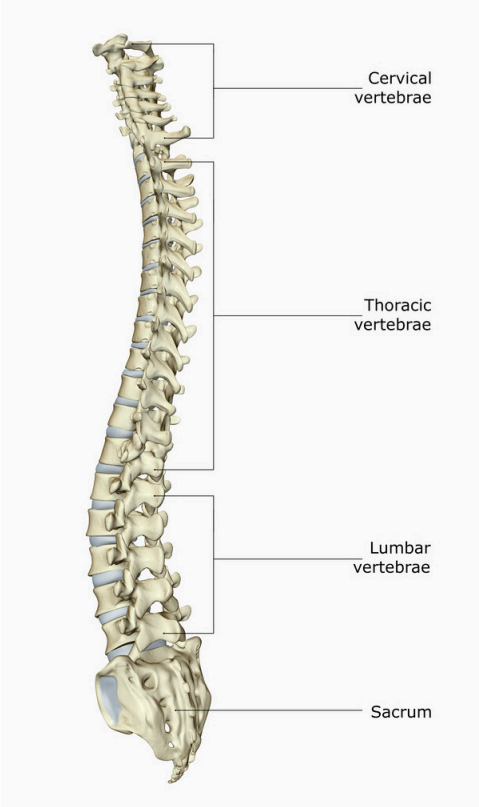
- **Learn how to manage stress.** Chronic stress and tension reduce blood flow to muscles, reducing the nutrients and oxygen they need to remain strong. Practice stress coping techniques regularly.
- **Eat a nutritious diet.** Include adequate calcium and vitamin D for strong bones.
- **If you're a smoker, quit.** Smoking interferes with blood flow to the spine which can cause disc degeneration. Heavy smoking also increases coughing, which can trigger back pain.

THE BALANCED, NEUTRAL SPINE



Three Natural Curves

Your spine has three natural curves:

1. Cervical
2. Thoracic
3. Lumbar

When all three curves are aligned, your ears, shoulders and hips are in a straight line. This allows your spine to balance your weight properly

- **Vertebrae.** There are 24 bones (the vertebrae) that make up the spine. The vertebrae protect spinal nerves and help support the spine.
- **Discs.** Fluid-filled discs separate the moving vertebrae and act as shock absorbers
- **Muscles & Ligaments.** Particularly the abdominal muscles, keep the spine upright and help your back bend, twist and straighten up.

When everything works together, it's easy to take for granted the amazing support and function that your back provides. But when even one element is out of balance, your back will force you to pay attention.

CORE MATTERS

The body's CORE is:

- The area around the trunk and pelvis.
- Where center of gravity is located.
- Where all movement in the body originates.
- The foundation for posture and balance.

A strong CORE provides:

- Increased protection for the back.
- Improved posture and balance.
- Greater strength, power and coordination for activities.

The core muscles include those of the abdomen, back and pelvis/hip, basically any muscle between the pelvis and base of the rib cage. Yoga, Pilates and Tai Chi are types of activities that help build a stronger core. Consult a trained fitness professional for ways to strengthen your core.

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POSTURE POINTERS

Improving posture is an effective way to maintain a healthy back; however, it does take practice and conscious effort. Good posture helps:

- Keep your bones and joints in the correct alignment so muscles are used properly.
- Decrease stress on the ligaments holding the joints of your spine together.
- Prevent strain or overuse problems.
- Prevent backache and muscular pain.
- Contribute to a good appearance.

Sitting

If you spend a lot of time sitting, follow these tips for good posture:

- Maintain your spine in a neutral, relaxed position. Avoid slouching or hunching your body forward. If your chair does not provide lumbar support, use a cushion or rolled towel to support your lower back.
- Distribute your body weight evenly on both hips with buttocks touching the back of the chair.
- Position your feet flat on the floor and use a footrest if the seat height of your chair is not adjustable.
- Keep your knees even with or slightly higher than the level of your hips.
- Keep your shoulders back and relaxed and position your head so that ears are aligned over shoulder; avoid thrusting your head forward at the neck.
- When sitting in a chair that rolls and pivots, don't twist at the waist while sitting; instead, turn your whole body.
- Avoid sitting for prolonged periods; get up every 30 minutes or so to move around and stretch your back.

Standing

Who hasn't had to stand in long lines or standing room only spaces before? Practice these tips:

- Maintain a straight, neutral spine; avoid slouching sideways or forward. Forget the military "attention" stance; it tends to over exaggerate the arch in your low back.
- Keep your chin level and head centered over the shoulders.
- Stand with your feet slightly less than shoulder width apart and your knees slightly bent.
- Lightly contract your abdominal muscles.
- Avoid prolonged standing; if not possible, shift your weight from side to side or place one foot on a step or other low footrest. Keep moving if you can.

Driving

Long commutes can aggravate your back. To minimize back strain while driving, try these tips:

- Sit with your knees level with your hips—or slightly higher.
- If your vehicle doesn't provide adequate built-in low back support, use a lumbar cushion or rolled towel to support the natural curve in your low back.
- Men, don't sit and drive with the wallet/billfold in your hip pocket. Take it out and place it on the dashboard or console.
- Sit at a comfortable distance from the steering wheel. Sitting too far away increases pressure on your lower spine and can stress your neck, shoulders and wrists. Sitting too close can increase your risk of injury from the airbag. Allow 10 inches between the center of the airbag cover and your breastbone.
- Take breaks; get out, stretch and move around during long trips.

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How to Put Your Back to Bed

The best sleeping position is one that helps maintain the natural, soft "S-shaped" curve of your spine. How do you sleep?

1. **On your back?** If so, place a pillow underneath your knees and/or a rolled towel or a small pillow under your low back.
2. **On your side?** (preferred) If so, bend your knees slightly and position pillow so that it's nested in curve of your neck to keep your head and neck in line with the rest of your spine. A pillow placed between your knees also helps to reduce back stress.

3. **On your stomach?** If so, this is NOT a recommended sleeping position. If you must, keep one leg bent about 90 degrees at the hip and knee and the same side arm bent about 90 degrees at the shoulder and elbow. Hugging a body pillow can make this position easier to maintain.

Regardless of your sleeping position, use a pillow that supports your cervical spine (neck). Choose one that contours to your head and neck while still providing support. There are many mattress choices for back-friendly beds. The ideal surface for most people is one that is gently supportive and medium-firm to firm and with no sagging. It should mold to your body while supporting it at the same time.

Lifting

Follow these tips when you lift:

- Lift only what you can handle and get help if you need it.
- Ensure safe and firm footing.
- Stand close to the object to be lifted with feet apart for balance.
- Squat down to pick up the object by bending at the knees and keeping back straight.
- Secure a firm hold on the object.
- Tighten your stomach muscles and slowly lift using your legs (not your back).
- Avoid twisting while lifting.
- Always lift and carry the object close to your body, at about waist level.
- Perform the same technique when lowering an object.

MORE HEALTHY BACK HABITS

- Wear flat or low-heeled shoes that offer good support and comfort.
- Avoid wearing a heavy handbag, tote bag, briefcase, laptop case or backpack over one shoulder. If you must, make sure the strap is wide and padded, adjust the strap length so it can go over the head and rest on the opposite shoulder, or switch shoulders often.
- Avoid cradling a telephone between your ear and shoulder.
- When brushing your teeth, be mindful of not bending forward from the waist. Use the large muscle groups in the legs to support your back by squatting slightly or open a cabinet below the sink and rest one foot on the edge.

Take steps today to support your always working back!

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; National Institutes of Health

This information is intended for educational purposes only and should not be interpreted as medical advice. Please consult your doctor for advice about changes that may affect your health.

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