

QUICK TAKES

Back Pain



Back pain is one of the most common medical problems.

According to the National Institutes of Health, it affects eight out of 10 people at some point during their lives.

Back pain can be prevented by knowing and managing your risk factors.

The top risk factors for back pain are:

- Lack of physical activity
- Being overweight
- Poor posture
- Frequent bending, lifting or twisting, or prolonged sitting
- Smoking
- Age



Yoga and Back Pain Prevention

Lack of exercise is a risk factor for developing back pain. Exercise not only strengthens the muscles of the back, neck and shoulders, but it also relaxes the back, reduces pain and increases flexibility.

It is recommended to do 15 to 30 minutes of back exercises two or three times a week to prevent back pain. Stretching, strengthening and aerobic exercise should all be included in a back pain prevention exercise plan.



More and more people are turning to yoga for back pain prevention. Yoga can help with back pain by both strengthening key muscle groups and also stretching and relaxing.

The poses in yoga, called asanas, focus on strength, balance, proper body alignment and posture. Yoga also helps with stress reduction, which can ease your pain symptoms.

A recent study in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* looked at the link between yoga practice and reduced back pain.

The study found that practicing yoga weekly for 12 weeks reduced symptoms of low back pain and this effect continued for up to six months as compared with the usual care.

Studies also have demonstrated that stretching exercises can help to reduce back pain and improve function.

If yoga or stretching exercises are something you want to try, first check with your health care provider. Seek out a yoga instructor who is well-versed in instructing those with back pain or injuries.

Ask friends and family for recommendations for local studios. Speak to the studio and tell them about your concerns about your back. They will suggest which class may be right for you. Be sure to let the instructor know about your condition, as well.

During class, be sure not to do anything that causes pain or discomfort in your back. A good yoga instructor will be able to offer you modifications to poses to make them safe for you. Many yoga studios will offer a free class or even a free week for you to try it out and see if it is right for you.

There are also a number of great yoga DVDs for your home practice if you are not ready to commit to a gym or yoga studio setting.

You can find videos on YouTube as well. The Yoga Journal (yogajournal.com) is a great resource for any stage of your practice. They have online videos and DVDs that you can purchase, as well.

Yoga Poses

Certain yoga poses are especially good at stretching and strengthening the spine.



Child's pose: First, sit on the floor with your legs folded underneath your body so that your bottom is resting on your ankles. Your knees should be wide with your big toes touching. Lean forward and place your forehead on the mat. If this is a strain you can rest your head on a yoga block or folded towel. Your arms remain by your sides. Breathe deeply here to stretch out the back muscles and relax into the pose, allowing tension to dissolve.



Cat/Cow pose: Begin on all fours, with your hands and knees on the ground. Your shoulders should be stacked directly over your wrists and your hips directly over your knees. Inhale and drop your belly toward the floor, gazing up. Exhale and round your back like a cat, gazing toward your belly. Hold each pose for a few seconds, and slowly move linking your breath with each movement.



Ragdoll/Forward Fold: Stand with your feet hip-width distance apart. Fold forward with your head toward the ground and your knees slightly bent. Hold opposite elbows and keep the head and neck relaxed. Breathe deeply during this pose. This pose will release tight hamstrings and the lower back.

Irish Beef and Barley Soup Makes 6 servings

Warm up on St. Patrick's Day (or any other cold, damp day in early spring) with this easy and satisfying soup. For a vegetarian version, omit the beef or lamb. Brown 1 pound crumbled soy meat or soysage in a little oil and add to the soup about five minutes before the end of cooking.

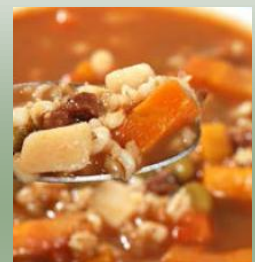
Ingredients

- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- 1 pound lean beef or lamb stewing meat, cut into 3/4-inch cubes
- 1 onion, chopped
- 6 cups low-sodium chicken, beef or vegetable broth
- 4 cups chopped green cabbage
- 2 large carrots, peeled and diced
- 1 turnip, peeled and diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1/2 cup uncooked pearled barley
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme leaves
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1/8 teaspoon ground allspice
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 or 2 scallions, thinly sliced, for garnish

Preparation

1. Heat olive oil in a Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Brown meat pieces. Add onion and cook a minute or two to soften. Add the remaining ingredients (except the sliced scallion). Bring to a simmer, lower the heat to medium-low and cook until the barley is just tender, about 30 minutes. Remove the bay leaf.
2. Ladle the hot soup into bowls and garnish with sliced scallions.

Source: *Healthy Living Kitchens*



Nutritional info (per serving)

- 299 Calories
- 6g Fat
- 1g Saturated fat
- 0g Trans fat
- 35g Protein
- 24g Carbohydrate
- 7g Fiber
- 93 mg Calcium
- 320 mg Sodium