

Back Pain Prevention

Chances are that at some point in your life you have experienced back pain. If not, there's a good chance you'll experience it in the future. Back pain is one of the most common medical problems. According to the National Institutes of Health, it affects 8 out of 10 people at some point during their lives.

Back pain affects people differently. Sometimes it is a dull ache and other times it can be sharp and sudden. Regardless of the type of pain, back pain can be debilitating. Back pain can be short lived or it can linger for weeks or even months. It is one of the leading causes of missed work and everyday people take medications, have surgery or seek some sort of treatment for this common ailment.

Many things can be the cause of back pain. Sometimes your doctor may not even know what is causing your pain. Some of the top causes include:

- Muscle or ligament strain
- Arthritis
- Osteoporosis
- Disk injury
- Skeletal irregularities.

No matter what the cause of your back pain, there are things you can do to help prevent it.

Know Your Risk Factors

Certain factors can raise your risk for back pain. Knowing your risk factors is the first step to helping prevent back pain. The following are all known risk factors:

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

Exercise

Regular exercise is one of the best ways to prevent back injuries. Exercise not only strengthens the muscles of the back, neck and shoulders, but it relaxes the back, reduces pain and increases flexibility. The NIH recommends 15 to 30 minutes of back exercises two or three times a week to prevent back pain.



There are three types of exercises for you to consider. They are:

- Stretching exercises
- Strengthening exercises
- Aerobic or endurance exercises.

Stretching or range-of-motion exercises help keep your back limber and improve your flexibility. Strengthening exercises involve weights or exercise bands that help to strengthen your muscles and the joints within the back. Aerobic exercise, such as walking, gets your heart pumping, increases lung capacity and keeps your joints moving. Look for activities you'll enjoy. Swimming, taking an easy yoga or Pilates class or just walking a dog can be a great start. Walking is another easy exercise that you can do anywhere.

If you have had back injuries before be sure to check with your doctor before starting an exercise program.

Exercises that increase balance and strength can decrease your risk of falling and injuring your back or breaking bones. Tai chi, yoga or any other weight-bearing exercise that challenges your balance is a good one to try. A recent study in the Archives of Internal Medicine has shown that yoga and intensive stretching can help reduce back pain. Yoga can help with back pain by both strengthening key muscle groups and also stretching and relaxing muscles. The poses in yoga (called asanas) focus on strength, balance, and proper body alignment and posture. Yoga may also help with stress reduction, which can ease your pain symptoms.

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Proper Body Mechanics

Using proper body mechanics and practicing good posture can help to keep your back healthy. Here are some key tips:

- When you must lift an object, avoid twisting your torso. Lift heavy objects using your legs, not your back. Do not bend at the waist to lift, instead bend your knees and use your leg muscles!
- Do not attempt to lift anything you suspect is too heavy for you and may cause pain. Ask for help.
- Be aware of your posture while sitting and standing.
- Wear flat-soled shoes with less than a one-inch heel.

For some of us, our jobs may be contributing to back pain. Prolonged sitting or standing can cause back pain. Try these tips:

- If you stand for long periods of time, rest one foot on a small support and place your weight on the other leg. Switch weight-bearing legs every 5 to 10 minutes. This will take some of the load off of your lower back.
- If you sit for long periods of time, use a chair with low-back support.
- Take breaks often to stretch and walk around.

Smoking



We've all heard that smoking is bad for our health. But few of us think that smoking can cause back pain. A study from the *American Journal of Medicine* found that smokers, especially young smokers, were more likely to report back pain. Researchers are not sure why but there are a few theories out

there. One such thought is that smoking causes less blood flow to the spine, which means less oxygen and nutrients being delivered to the spine. This decreased circulation may increase the degeneration of the disks in the spine.



When to See a Doctor

If you follow the prevention tips but still develop back pain you may be able to handle the pain at home. However, if your back pain is associated with any of the following symptoms you should seek medical attention:

- Injury
- Numbness or tingling
- Fever
- Loss of bowel or bladder function.

Millions of people every day suffer from back pain. While it can be debilitating, there are things you can do to help lessen your chance of developing back pain. They include:

- Exercising regularly
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Using proper body mechanics
- Quitting smoking.

Following these tips will help keep back pain at bay.

Source:
<http://www.niams.nih.gov>