



Taking Care of Your Back

What position are you in right now? Are you sitting up straight or slouching? Are your feet planted firmly under you, or are you sitting on one leg or leaning forward? You might not think much about your back—until it starts hurting.

While it's often difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of back pain, lifestyle factors are largely to blame, including

- Poor posture
- Lifting incorrectly
- Sedentary habits
- Obesity
- Tensing up under stress
- Smoking

Taking simple precautions can prevent most cases of back pain. Caring for your back is as easy as modifying the way you do things and improving your strength and flexibility through a sensible fitness program.

Back pain is often related to muscle, ligament, and tendon problems around the spine. Herniated or slipped discs and other structural issues account for a small amount of back pain cases. The best way to prevent back pain is to avoid straining your back muscles. You can avoid strain by stretching and strengthening the muscles and using proper posture and lifting techniques.

Having good posture is a key to preventing back pain. Proper posture means correctly positioning your body all the time. Sitting, exercising, working, and doing chores, even sleeping, require good posture to prevent back injury and pain.

Your lower back supports most of your body weight, making it prone to injury. By improving the strength and flexibility of supporting muscles, you can help reduce back strain. Strong abdominal muscles and lower back muscles, combined with strong and flexible lower body muscles (quadriceps, hamstrings and hip flexors), will help take the pressure off your back.

Your back takes on the stress of everything you do. Sitting, standing, bending, walking, and sleeping would be impossible without the support of your back, a complex arrangement of bones, muscles, and connective tissues.

Maintaining Good Posture

Your back is healthiest and most stable when it's in a neutral position, which means that your spine's three natural curves are aligned properly. Think of your vertebrae as stacked blocks: If one block is misaligned, the entire stack is affected, and your muscles and ligaments must work harder to support you. Keeping your vertebrae aligned reduces stress on the muscles, ligaments, bones, and joints in your back.

Here are some tips for maintaining proper posture:

Standing: Standing for long periods of time can put pressure on back joints. Shift your weight often, or place one foot on a footrest or stool. Stretch or move around at least once every half hour.

Sitting: If your job requires sitting for long periods, make sure you have an ergonomically designed chair or one that provides proper back support. If you don't, roll up a towel and place it behind your lower back to provide support. Avoid slouching. Sit upright with your buttocks against the chair. Your knees should be level with your hips. If your feet dangle, use a footstool. Items at your work space should be within easy reach to prevent twisting and overextending. Take several breaks throughout the day to walk around and stretch.

Driving: Adjust the seat or place a towel behind your back so that your back is supported. You shouldn't have to stretch or lean forward. Adjust the headrest so it supports the middle of your head. On long trips, stop occasionally to stretch your legs and give your back a break.

Sleeping: Use a supportive mattress and avoid sleeping on your stomach, which places too much pressure on your lower back. If you sleep on your side, place a pillow between your knees. The pillow under your head should fill in the space between the bed and your neck to help keep your neck horizontal. If you're a back sleeper, place a small pillow under your knees and make sure your neck is supported properly. Avoid sleeping with your arms above your head, which puts stress on your shoulders and neck.

How do I know if I have good posture?

Because many people are so used to bad posture, good posture may not always feel right. Paying attention to your posture in everything you do will help. Here are some things you can do to check your posture:

Stand against a wall. Your head, shoulder blades, buttocks and heels should all touch the wall, and your lower back should be close to the wall. If your head's not touching the wall, straighten your shoulders. If your lower back is far from the wall (known as sway back), tighten your abs and tilt your pelvis so that it's closer to the wall. Check yourself in a mirror or ask someone to check your posture while standing. From the side your ear, shoulder, hip, knee and the front of your ankle should all form a vertical line.

Completely slouch in your chair. Now, stick out your chest and sit up completely straight, overarchng your back. Relax this position slightly, until you feel you're sitting straight up, comfortably, with your back supported by the chair. This is the posture you should maintain while sitting.

Lifting

Lifting things incorrectly can injure your back. When you're lifting something, be sure to use your legs and stomach muscles, not your back. To lift objects properly;

- Take your time and prepare your body to lift with proper form.
- Stand close to the object you want to lift.
- Place your feet shoulder width apart, with your toes turned slightly out. You may want to put one foot slightly in front of the other.
- Bend at the knees (not the waist) to lower yourself toward the ground, keeping your back straight.
- Grab the object firmly and bring it as close to your body as possible.
- Lift the item by straightening your legs, keeping your back as straight as possible. Tighten your stomach muscles as you lift. Do not twist or turn while lifting.
- Lift objects only chest high unless they're very light.
- Get help when lifting heavy objects.

Source: *Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2016). Taking care of your back. Raleigh,*
<https://resources.powerflexweb.com/contentDetail.php?idDivision=04&idModule=m024&idCategory=&recid=41458>

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