



DHRM/Office of Health Benefits



A Guide to a Healthy Back

Don't be Derailed by Back Pain



Every day, whether at work or play, you use your back in a variety of activities. It's easy to take your back for granted, until you're derailed by back pain. Contrary to what many think, most back problems are not the result of a single injury but rather, happen after months or years of poor posture, improper body mechanics, tight or weak muscles, and lack of overall fitness.

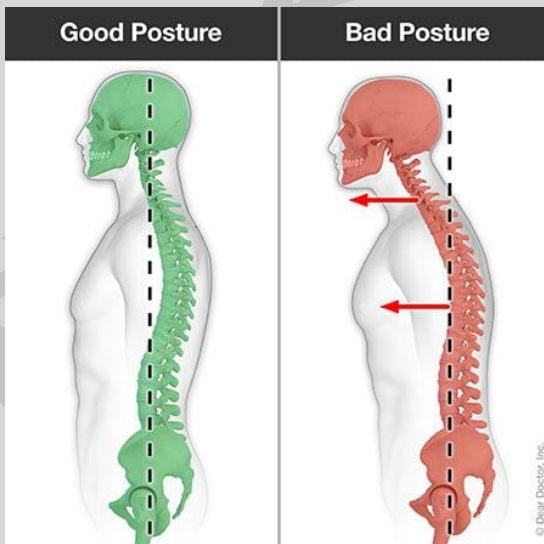
This booklet will provide simple steps to help you to care for your back to prevent injury and pain.

5 Ways to Improve Back Health

1

Maintain Good Posture

Good posture is an important part of your long-term health. Holding your body the correct way, whether you are standing, sitting, moving, or sleeping can prevent pain, injury, and other health problems.



- Maintain a neutral spine - line up your ear, shoulder, and hip
- Keep your shoulders down and back
- Tighten your core muscles (pull your belly button toward your spine)
- Support your lower back when seated to prevent slouching
- When standing for long periods, shift your weight or bend one knee
- Change your position often

2

Adjust for a Proper Fit

How To

Set Up Your Office Workstation



Windows

Where possible, place monitor at 90 degrees from windows to prevent glare.

Task Light/Mobile Device

Frequently used items placed within arm's reach. Limit work time spent on mobile device. Use external equipment where possible.

Monitor/Laptop Height

Adjust top of the screen to eye level or slightly below (2-3 inches).¹ Set laptop on a stand if needed.

Breaks

Take visual break every 20-30 minutes.



Headset

Use headset if telephone use is extensive and together with keyboarding.

Head

Upright and over shoulders, not leaning towards screen.

Document Holder

Place next to and at same height as monitor.²

Monitor/Laptop Distance

Approximately arm's length away and slightly tilted.

Shoulders

Relaxed and not hunched.

Hands and Wrists

Relaxed and straight with minimal bending. Avoid leaning on wrist rest while typing and mousing.

Back

Upright/slightly inclined, sit fully back on chair.

Body

Aligned with monitor and keyboard.

Backrest

Adjust height of lumbar support to support lower back.

Elbows

Relaxed, closed to body, at about 90 degrees.

Armrests

Adjustable armrests at elbow height and aligned with forearms.

Keyboard and Mouse

Placed next to each other and at the same height. Lay flat on desk. Use keyboard tray as needed.³

Feet

Fully supported, use adjustable footrest if needed.

Seatpan

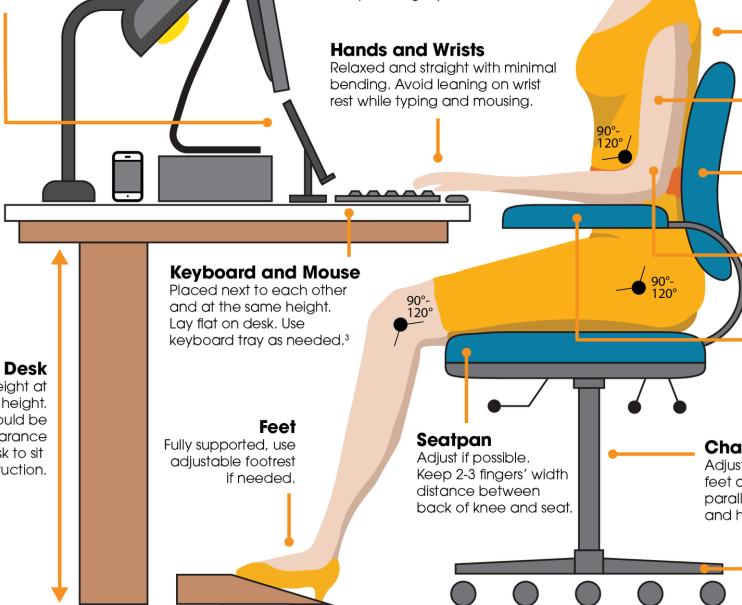
Adjust if possible. Keep 2-3 fingers' width distance between back of knee and seat.

Chair Height

Adjust chair height until feet are flat on floor, thighs parallel to floor, and knees and hips at about 90 degrees.

Chair Base

Five prongs for stability.



Desk

Desk height at elbow height. Should be sufficient clearance under desk to sit without obstruction.

3

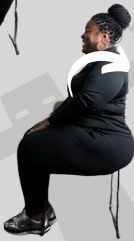
Stretch and Strengthen

Long hours at the desk play a role in back pain. Regular back exercise can help reduce pain, improve flexibility, and prevent long-term issues. Follow these tips:

- Do not hold your breath or strain
- Move slowly and smoothly through the exercises
- Stretch to the point of mild discomfort, not pain
- Do the exercises 3-5 times per week
- If an exercise causes pain, STOP
- Talk to your doctor/physical therapist if you have pain



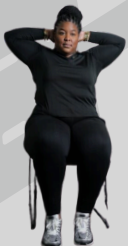
Head Tilt: Slowly bring your right ear toward your right shoulder. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat on the left side. Finally, tilt your head forward to stretch the muscles at the back of your neck. Repeat 3 times each direction.



Shoulder Roll: Slowly roll your shoulders backward in a circular motion 5 times. Next roll your shoulders forward in a circular motion 5 times.



Overhead Stretch: Lace your fingers and raise your arms above your head with palms facing upward. Straighten your arms as best you can and hold for 10 seconds. Next, lower your arms to the front (keep palms turned outward) until they are parallel to the floor. Push your hands forward until you feel a stretch across your shoulders and upper back. Hold for 10 seconds. Repeat 2-3 times.



Chest Stretch: Sit tall, lace your fingers behind your head and point your elbows outward so that you are bringing your shoulder blades closer together. Feel the stretch across your chest. Hold for 10 seconds. Repeat 2-3 times.



Back Stretch: Sit all the way back in your chair. Bend forward from the hips bringing your chest toward your thighs and let your head hang toward your toes. Hang your arms and hands toward the floor. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat 2-3 times.



Hamstring Stretch: Sit toward the edge of your chair with one leg out in front of you, keeping the knee straight. Flex your toes toward your shin. Keeping your back straight, lean forward at your hips until a gentle stretch is felt through the back of the thigh. Hold for 20 seconds. Repeat 2-3 times on each side.



Torso Twist: Cross your right leg over your left with your left hand on the outside of your right leg. Lightly pressing your left hand against your thigh, gently turn your upper body to look over your right shoulder. Hold for 20 seconds and repeat on the other side. Repeat 2-3 times.



Hip Stretch: Sitting straight in your chair with your left foot on the ground, cross your right ankle on top of your left knee. Keeping your back straight, gently lean forward until you feel a stretch in your hip and glute (buttocks) muscles. Hold for 20 seconds. Repeat 2-3 times on each side.

Strong and flexible back muscles are key to preventing pain.

Strengthening Exercises



Desk or Wall Push-Ups: Use a desk sturdy enough to support your body weight! Take a few steps back from the desk or wall and place your hands flat on the surface, a little wider than shoulder-width. Bend your arms at the elbow and lower yourself toward the desk/wall, keeping your core tight. Next, push up until arms are straight but not locked. Repeat 10 times.



Upper Back Squeeze: Place arms in a “W” position with shoulders relaxed. Move elbows back, bringing shoulder blades together and downward. Relax, then repeat 10 times.



Pelvic Tilt: Sit back in your chair with feet flat on the floor. Tighten your abdominal and buttocks muscles and tilt your hips upward to flatten your lower back into the back of the chair (visualize pulling your belly button toward your spine). Hold for 10 seconds and release. Repeat 10-15 times.



Seated Crunches: Sit at the edge of your chair with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Contract your abdominal muscles and lean back until you are almost touching the back of the chair. Keeping your abdominal muscles tight and your back straight, raise yourself to return to your starting position. Repeat 10-15 times.



Upright Leg Lift: Stand with your hands on the back of a sturdy chair without wheels. Lift your right leg straight behind without arching your back. Hold for 5 seconds, relax. Repeat 10-15 times with each leg.



Seated Knee Lift: Sit straight in a chair, lower back supported, with your feet flat on the floor. Raise one knee up toward your chest. Lower your foot back down. Repeat 10-15 times each side.



Chair Squat: Stand in front of a stationary chair with your feet shoulder-width apart. Keep your back straight and bend your knees as you lower into the chair. Try to keep your weight on your heels and lower slowly. Squeeze your buttocks as you slowly return to standing. Repeat 5 -10 times. For more challenge, hold your arms out in front of you as you squat.

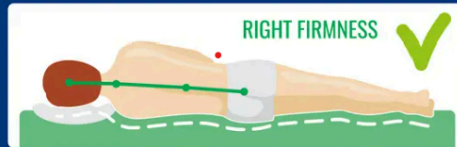
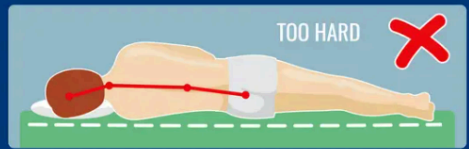
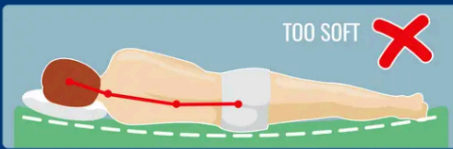
Think of your exercise time as a relaxation break. Enjoy taking a few minutes to take care of you!

4

Sleep Well Supported

While you're sleeping, your spine has an opportunity to rest. To make the most of this time, your mattress and pillows should support your spine in a comfortable way.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT MATTRESS



To help keep your spine naturally aligned;

- Back sleepers—place a pillow beneath the knees to reduce stress on the lower back.
- Side sleepers—place a pillow between the knees to keep the hips balanced.
- Pillow—Some may benefit from a neck pillow that supports the cervical spine. Experiment with different types of pillows to see what's most comfortable for you.

5

Eat Well ● Exercise ● Don't Smoke

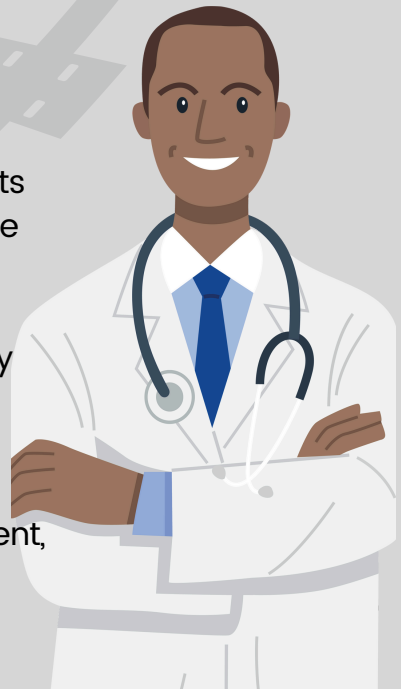
The same general recommendations we take to stay healthy overall also help protect our backs. A nutritious diet, regular exercise, and being smoke-free are always helpful.

- Focus on high-quality foods such as whole grains, nuts, and fresh fruits and vegetables. The more colorful your plate, the better.
- Move more. Aim for about 30 minutes of activity, at least five days a week.
- Smoke-free is the way to be. Smoking contributes to back pain in two ways:
 - Nicotine reduces blood flow to the vertebrae and discs which may trigger back pain.
 - Smokers tend to lose bone mass faster than nonsmokers, putting them at greater risk for osteoporosis, a cause of back pain.

self
care

Best Practices for Back Health

- Aim to maintain a healthy weight. Talk with your doctor about a recommended weight range that would be comfortable and appropriate for you.
- Prioritize stretching and strengthening your back muscles. Aim to stretch twice a day, in the morning and before bed.
- Reduce consumption of inflammatory foods such as added sugars and processed foods.
- Choose a balanced diet with fresh fruits and vegetables, lean meats, and whole grains.
- Stay active. Change positions often by taking breaks to move around, stand, walk, and stretch throughout the day.
- If pain is difficult to manage or persistent, seek medical advice from your healthcare team.



Lift Like a Pro

CORRECT LIFTING TECHNIQUE

Plan your lift, checking you have a clear route.

Keep your back straight.

Bend your knees (not your waist) and lift with your leg muscles.

Wear appropriate footwear.



Face forwards, do not bend your neck.

Do not stack boxes if this will obscure your view.

Get a good grip and hold the object close to your body.

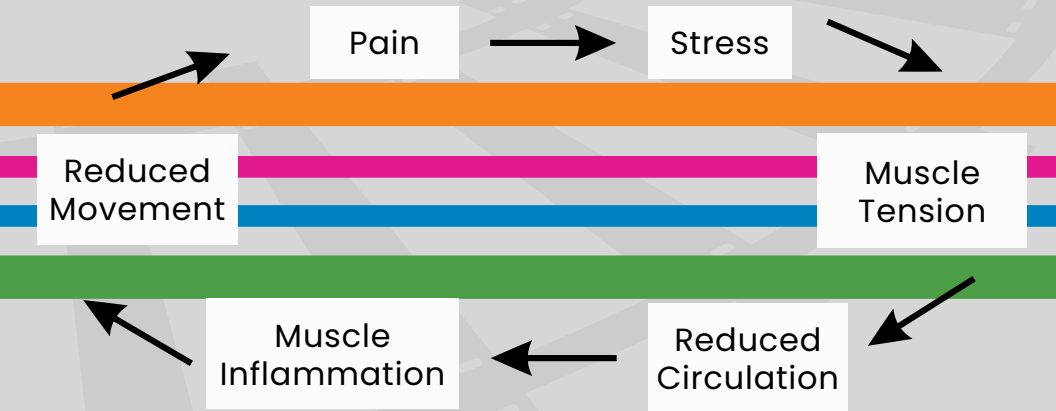
Keep your feet shoulder width apart.

- Take small steps and use your feet to change direction.
- Don't twist.
- Keep shoulders and hips in line as you change direction.
- Have a good grip and use handles if available.
- Test the weight. Don't lift more than you can easily lift.
- For heavy loads, try a team lift or a mechanical device.
- Never lift or move a heavy load above your head.
- Never ascend or descend a ladder carrying a load.

Stress and Back Pain

Stress often contributes to neck and back pain. Over time, repetitive bouts of stress can result in musculoskeletal issues related to chronic muscle tension and inflammation.

For example, when we're stressed, our breathing patterns change and we tend to hunch up our shoulders, leading to tension in the upper and mid-back. Additionally, many of us become more sedentary during periods of stress which means we exercise less. This inactivity sets up a vicious cycle leading to more pain and more inactivity.



An effective way to reduce stress and back pain is to move more. Physical activity can release endorphins which make you feel better and help reduce stress. Make a point to get up during the workday and do a few laps around the office every few hours. If possible, take a walk at lunchtime. At home, carve out time to read a good book, exercise, spend time with family and friends, or practice mindfulness or meditation.

First Aid for Back Pain

Don't Rest an Achy Back

It's a common myth that you need to avoid activity when your back hurts. In fact, being still can often make pain worse and lead to complications. Check with your health care provider, but in general, continue with light activity within the limits of pain. Light activity, such as walking or gentle stretching, is one of the most effective ways to resolve back pain more quickly. Decrease or stop activity that increases pain, but don't avoid activity.



Ice vs. Heat



Applying ice to painful areas may reduce pain and inflammation from a new injury. Try icing painful areas several times a day for about 20 minutes each time. Be sure to take a break between sessions and protect your skin by wrapping the ice in a thin towel or cloth. After 2-3 days, switch to heat to relax muscles and increase the blood flow and nutrients to the injured area. Try a warm soak or use hot packs, but again be sure to protect your skin and take breaks between sessions.

Health Plan Support

Anthem, Aetna, Sentara, and Kaiser

Review the information provided by your health plan to learn more about covered services such as physical therapy (in-person and virtual), chiropractic care, and more.



In addition, most plans include health/well-being coaching support and resources to help you live a healthier lifestyle. Depending on your plan, coaching may include web and mobile access, online group-coaching sessions, one-on-one phone support, or In-person connections. To learn more, visit your plan's website and search well-being coaching.



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