



BACK HEALTH



back health

Your Guide to Prevention, Self-Care & Treatment

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An Ounce of Prevention: Day-to-Day Back Care

Nearly 80 percent of us will experience back pain at some point in our lives. That's why it pays to do all you can every day to prevent back pain before it starts. Read on to find out how you can be kind to your back at work, at play and at rest.

HOW TO LIFT CORRECTLY

- **Get** close to the load, as if you're hugging the object.
- **Stay** upright. Maintain a normal, upright posture as you lift.
- **Tighten** your stomach muscles (but don't hold your breath).
- **Lift** with your legs. Your leg muscles are the strongest ones you have.
- **Turn** with your feet. Don't twist your back as you're holding an object.

KEEP IN MIND THESE POINTS:

- Don't ever bend over at the waist to lift an object, no matter how light it is — you could strain your back.
- Try not to retrieve objects from shelves that are too high to reach. Use a sturdy stepladder, and keep the object close to your body to avoid twisting your back.
- Use your arms and legs, not your back, to do the work of lifting. ♦

POSTURE CHECK, 1-2-3

Do you need to relearn how to sit and stand correctly? This might sound strange. After all, you do both countless times every day. But both of these activities can tire, and even injure, your back muscles.

A few times a day, check your posture. Here's how:

1. **Note** the three curves of your spine — your neck (cervical curve), middle back (thoracic curve) and lower back (lumbar curve). Make sure your back is not arched backward or slouched forward.
2. **If** you're sitting, are your feet flat on the floor and your thighs parallel to the ground? Is your lower back against the chair's backrest? Use a small pillow or rolled-up towel if your chair has poor lumbar support.
3. **Are** you sitting or standing up straight with your ears, shoulders and hips in line?

Remember: Move around. Regular activity will improve circulation and reduce muscle fatigue. ♦

PICK IT UP THE RIGHT WAY

You've probably heard it a million times: Bend at your knees when you lift something. But that's not the only thing you should know when lifting.

Here are some other guidelines to help you safely lift loads:

Know where to go. Check for obstacles and choose a clear path.

Increase your balance. Keep your feet shoulder-width apart. Place one foot slightly forward before you lift.

Make it smooth. Don't jerk as you lift because sudden movements and weight shifts can injure your back.

Hold it close. Keep the load close to your body and at waist height. ♦

4 WAYS TO SAVE YOUR NECK

It's all connected — pain in your neck can translate to pain in the shoulders, head and even your lower back. *If you are bothered at times by a stiff neck, here's how to keep it from happening:*

- **Take a stand.** If you sit for long periods, get up and move around every hour.
- **Sit smart.** Place a rolled-up towel between the chair and your lower back. It will better align your spine and give you extra support.

- **Stick your neck out.** Work out the kinks ... slowly tilt your head forward and backward as far as possible; carefully turn your head from side to side, gently tilt your head toward one shoulder while keeping the other shoulder straight; then repeat on the other side.
- **Take the pressure off.** Sleep on your side, with your hips and knees bent. Consider a cervical pillow to support your neck or a special "water pillow" (try medical supply stores), which volunteers in one study said let them sleep with less neck pain. ♦

BACK BELTS

To wear or not to wear? That is the question concerning back belts. Back injuries account for nearly 20 percent of workplace health problems, and back belts have become increasingly popular as a way to prevent them. Still, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) says there isn't sufficient evidence to prove that back belts can help prevent back injury.

If you decide to wear a back belt at work, NIOSH recommends the following:

- **Consult** your physician, especially if you're receiving medical care for back problems.
- **Tighten** the belt only for short periods. There's evidence of adverse health effects from wearing a tight back belt for too long.
- **Use** safe lifting techniques while wearing a back belt.
- **Avoid** lifting anything that you wouldn't lift without a back belt. The belts don't make your back stronger.
- **Know** that long-term use of a back belt may increase your risk of back-related injury when you stop wearing the belt because your body is not used to lifting without it. ♦

3 LESSER-KNOWN PREVENTION TIPS

Your back is always at work, whether you're working, playing or sleeping. In many ways, it takes the brunt of your days' activities. *Here are some ways to keep it healthy and strong, every day:*



The Computer Comfort Angle

Position the screen so your eyes are nearly level with the top of the monitor and you're looking slightly down at it. **Smart move:** Tilt the monitor a little upward. You'll gain greater freedom to move your head and neck and still be able to see the screen.