



back care

# newsletter

## Back to basics

*A sore back can sneak up slowly or strike you down like a bolt from the blue – either way it's painful and hard to ignore. You have an 80% chance of suffering lower back pain at some point in your life,<sup>1</sup> but the good news is that it's rarely serious. There's plenty you can do to reduce your chances of a bad back and ease the pain if it strikes.*

Your back is a complicated piece of machinery, made up of 24 small bones (vertebrae), shock absorbing discs, ligaments, tendons, nerves, muscles and your spinal cord. The lower part of your back, known as the lumbar region, is made up of just five vertebrae that carry the weight of your entire upper body (along with any extra weight you might be carrying).<sup>2</sup>

Because the back itself is so complex, even small amounts of damage to any of its parts can cause quite a lot of pain and discomfort. Although back pain is most common in people aged 35-55, it can affect anyone at any age. So it's a good idea to make sure you have a few tricks up your sleeve to give you the best chance at keeping your back healthy and avoiding those nasty aches and pains.

### Preventing pain

Back pain is a main cause of work absences, but changing a few habits can make a big difference to your chances of being laid low with a bad back.

When you're **sitting**, try not to cross your legs and make sure you have support in the small of your back (level with your waist – use a small cushion or roll up a towel or sweater if your chair doesn't provide enough support). The same goes for **driving**, and make sure your side mirrors are in the right place to prevent twisting your body too much.

Try to always sit and **stand up straight**, with your feet flat on the floor and your weight evenly spread between them. Hunching your shoulders isn't great for your posture either, so relax a bit to get your shoulders square.



You spend hours **lying in bed** every night, so the kind of mattress you have and the way you lie is bound to have an effect on your back. Lie on your mattress and slide your hand (palm down) under the small of your back. It should slide in fairly easily – if you have to squeeze your hand in, your mattress is probably too soft, but if there's a big gap, your mattress is probably too hard. Your pillow should mold around your head, supporting the curve underneath your neck.

The time you spend on your feet also affects how healthy your back is. Stick with flat, comfortable, **well-fitting shoes** as much as you can. Even if some occasions call for more uncomfortable footwear, why not keep your sneakers on until the last minute? No one will know.

Losing any **extra pounds** will also ease the strain on your back, but don't go too far – being underweight can weaken your bones and affect your long-term back health.

### And stretching

Gentle stretching exercises can work wonders for warding off back pain, and they can also help to get rid of it when it strikes.

For more information on all these subjects and more, visit [myCIGNA.com](http://myCIGNA.com), select the My Health tab, and browse the Healthwise® online medical encyclopedia.

*it's time to feel better*



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Strong muscles mean a nice strong back, and gentle exercises like walking and swimming can help strengthen your back muscles without putting any extra strain on them. There are also a number of strengthening exercises you can do to help prevent or relieve back pain.<sup>2</sup>

### Posture perfect

Posture doesn't mean walking around with books balanced on your head, but getting your posture right when you're standing or lifting heavy objects can make a world of difference for your back.

**Standing tips:** Imagine a piece of string is attached to the top of your head pulling your body up straight. Keep your weight spread evenly over both feet and hold your head straight, not tilted or turned to one side. Your shoulders should be square, so you might need to relax and pull them back a bit. Keep your chest forward and hold your stomach muscles in.

**Lifting tips:** Think first – can you really manage the load? Is your path clear? Can anyone/anything help you? When you're ready to lift, stand with your feet planted firmly on the ground shoulder-width apart. Bend at the knees and hips (not your lower back), keep your back straight and tense your stomach muscles for support. Get a good grip on your load with both hands and lift in a smooth movement using your leg muscles. When you're carrying, keep your load close to your body, your head up and your shoulders in line with your hips so you don't twist around.

### What to do if back pain strikes

Your spine is very strong, so even if you do end up with back pain it may be sore but it's probably not serious. The most common causes of pain are strains (overstretched muscles) and sprains (overstretched ligaments). With this kind of back pain, nothing usually shows up in tests or X-rays and nothing is permanently damaged, but it can take a few weeks for the pain to fade.

Although your first instinct may be to go to bed until the pain goes away, this is actually not going to help your back get better. Here are a few tips on how to deal with the pain and get back in top form:

**Hot and cold.** Applying a cold compress (like a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a towel) will help to bring down the initial swelling. Use a cold pack every few hours for the first 24 hours. After that, heat can help ease muscular aches, so try a warm shower or hot water bottle.

**Stay active.** Staying as active as possible will often help to relieve symptoms, even if you're in a lot of pain.

**Painkillers.** Normal, over-the-counter medicines can help reduce inflammation and ease back pain. Medication that contains ibuprofen or aspirin targets the inflammation that can be making your back sore (if you have asthma, stomach problems or an ulcer, you should check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking these medicines). Acetaminophen is also good for dealing with the pain, but isn't an anti-inflammatory like ibuprofen and aspirin.

**Ask for help.** If the pain is no better in two or three days, seek medical assistance. If your doctor thinks it is right for you, he/she may put you in touch with an osteopath, chiropractor or physiotherapist who will have special knowledge of how to treat your back pain. Some people could also benefit from acupuncture, as recent studies suggest it could bring relief from back pain for some people.<sup>3</sup>

- **Wall slides** – standing with your back against a wall and your feet shoulder-width apart, slide down to a crouch so your knees are bent to about 90 degrees. Count to five, then slide back up. Repeat five times.
- **Leg raises** – lie flat on your back on the floor. Lift your heels off the floor one at a time while keeping your legs straight. Repeat five times.
- **Bottom lifts** – lie flat on your back on the floor and bend your knees up so your feet are flat on the floor. Lift your bottom up by tightening your stomach muscles, while keeping your back straight. Repeat five times.

Try doing these exercises a few times a day to begin with, gradually working up to about six times a day if you can.

If you use the gym, include some abdominal and back strengthening exercises in your workout. Get some advice on what exercises to do from a professional, and remember to start slowly and build up.

1. Health & Safety Executive, Why better backs? <http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/campaigns/whybetterbacks.htm>. Visited 22 February 2008.
2. NHS Direct, Back pain, <http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/articles/article.aspx?articleId=234>. Visited 22 February 2008.
3. Ammendolia C et al., Evidence-informed management of chronic low back pain with needle acupuncture, *The Spine Journal*, Volume 8, Issue 1, January-February 2008, Pages 160-172.

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