

The importance of protecting your back



Adopting lifestyle habits to prevent back pain and injuries

What can you do to protect your back?

Even mild lower back pain can affect how productive you are during the day. When you feel an ache or twinge in your back, you may move more slowly and carefully. If the pain increases over time, you may find yourself losing sleep, feeling anxious, and avoiding activities that could make the pain worse.

Even simple things, like getting out of a chair, can become challenging.

Back pain isn't a disease, but it can be as debilitating and even disabling as a disease. In Australia, back pain and problems is a large contributor to illness, pain, and disability¹. Based on data from the Australian Burden of Disease Study 2015, it is also the second leading cause of burden overall.

Fortunately, there's a wealth of information about chronic low back pain and how to prevent lower back problems before they begin with simple lifestyle changes.

Avoid the 'weekend warrior' syndrome

Are you a weekend warrior? That's a person who reserves intense physical activity—exercising, playing sports—for just the weekend. During the week, you may not exercise at all because you're too busy with work and family responsibilities. Or perhaps you think the weekend is the only good time to maintain your fitness level.

Weekend warriors are more likely to suffer painful back injuries than people who make moderate physical activity a daily habit.² Studies show that regular low-impact aerobic exercise is beneficial for maintaining the integrity of intervertebral discs.²

An intervertebral disc acts as shock absorber between each of the vertebrae in the spinal column by keeping the vertebrae separated when there is impact from activity.² They also serve to protect the nerves that run down the middle of the spine and intervertebral disc.²

The disc can handle a lot of pressure. If a disc is damaged, the resulting back pain can become more severe over time. One of the risk factors for disc problems may be a lack of regular exercise.²

Maintain a healthy weight

Being overweight can put stress on the back.² There is often a relationship between being overweight and having a sedentary lifestyle. If you follow a healthy diet regimen, you can reduce the strain on your back. Regular exercise during the week may reduce the effects of sedentary habits and help strengthen your back at the same time.²

Move as much as possible

The spine is designed for movement. Sitting in one position for extended periods of time stiffens your back muscles, which can put stress on your spine. All kinds of movement stimulates blood flow, and blood brings important nutrients and oxygen to the structures of the back - helping prevent soft tissues in the low back from stiffening and aching which typically occur after sitting for a long time. Be sure to stand up and move around periodically through the day. Even 10 seconds of movement and stretching is better than sitting still.

Other lifestyle changes that may help you maintain a healthy, pain-free back:²

Sleep

- Place a pillow between your knees while sleeping on your side
- Avoid sleeping on your stomach
- If you do not have knee problems, you may try placing a pillow under your knees when lying on your back to help ease your back muscles

Stress

- Daily stress may cause you to tighten your shoulder and back muscles, and could eventually lead to back muscle spasms

Posture

- Avoid slouching and hunching your shoulders
- Try not to hover over laptops, tablets and smartphones with your head down. Your head is actually heavy, and your neck was designed to hold it up rather than forward

Sitting

- Keep your stomach muscles pulled in, and maintain the proper curve in your lower back (tighten your stomach and buttock muscles, but don't hold your breath)
- Place a small cushion behind your lower back to help maintain the natural curve of your back
- Keep your knees slightly higher than your hips (using a footstool or even a book under your feet)

Lifting heavy objects

- Squat and use your legs instead of your back to lift
- Hold the object close to you when moving it from one place to another
- Get help to lift objects that are too heavy to lift on your own

Standing

- Stand with your weight equally distributed on both of your feet
- Carefully place one foot on a footstool to ease tension in your back
- Wear flat or low-heeled shoes if you stand for long periods of time
- Keep your stomach muscles pulled in, and maintain the proper curve in your lower back (tighten your stomach and buttock muscles, but don't hold your breath)

Stretch your hamstrings

- Stretching your hamstrings can decrease the pressure on your pelvis and provide relief across your lower back

Strengthen your core

- Strong core muscles (which include your abdominal muscles, back muscles and the muscles around the pelvis) are important for providing lower back support

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, aihw.gov.au, "Back problems", August 2019.

2. National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, "Back Pain Fact Sheet," December 2014

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