

TEN STEPS TO A HEALTHY BACK

Consider the number:

- Eight out of ten people will develop a back problem at some point in their life. "The annual cost of treating backache in the United States is estimated at 14 billion dollars.
- Back pain is responsible for 90 million days lost from work each year. There's no question about it, back pain carries a high price tag. But you can take steps to prevent and even improve a bad back condition. Of course, if you do have an existing problem, see your doctor first for a qualified diagnosis. Then with the doctor's approval, begin a back-improvement program. Here's how to get started.

(1) JOIN AN EXERCISE CLASS FOR PEOPLE WITH BACK PROBLEMS, and stick with it. Even once-skeptical surgeons now agree that the right exercise can do wonders for a troubled spine.

Many people with back problems have back and hamstring muscles too tight for toe-touching, and abdominal muscles too weak for sit-ups.

The back and hamstring muscles support the entire structure of the back. They must be strong and flexible—you should be able to bend over, sit or twist without straining your back.

The abdominal muscles, when strung, help to stabilize the lower back, the spine's most vulnerable point. Weak stomach muscles allow an exaggerated curve in the lower back, a posture that crimps discs and nerves.

To stretch the back and hamstring muscles, I prescribe a series of exercises, including knee-to-chest pulls, cat curls, and hip rolls. To tighten the stomach, I recommend half sit-ups with knees bent, alternate leg lifts, pelvic tilts, and other exercises.

There are many excellent back exercise programs offered. Just make sure the program you select is a reputable one using certified instructors. Another word of warning: Rest, not exercise, is best when you are in pain. And no exercise should hurt.

(2) ASSUME THE "S" STANCE. The trick to standing, and walking is to find a posture that feels comfortable but offers your maximum support. "We want to maintain the gentle "S" curve of the spine" says Terry Nordstrom, director of the department of physical and occupational therapy and originator of the Back School of Stanford University.

For some, in the case of sway-back, it helps to pull in the stomach and tuck under the buttocks. This tilts the pelvis toward the back and provides crucial support for the lower spine. Keep your knees slightly flexed, too. Also, when you're standing a long time, you can tilt the pelvis back and flatten the small of your back by placing one foot on a stool, chair railing, or other object a few inches high.

(3) SIT ERECT. Here again, you want to maintain the back's "S" curve. People with lower-back pain tend to flop into a chair or sofa, throwing their backs into a drooping "C" shape. This posture overstretchs the lower-back ligaments while compressing the nerve passing out of the spinal column. The easiest way to avoid slouching is to remember to sit erect. Use a small pillow two or three inches thick behind your lower back to provide added support. And avoid prolonged sitting. Take a stand-up break every hour.

(4) INVEST IN A CAR WITH GOOD SEATS. If you're shopping for a new car, look for seats that offer good back support. Today many manufacturers are aware of the selling qualities of comfortable, supportive seating. Equip your older car with an orthopedic form. Pull the seat forward so your knees are raised to hip level; your right leg should not be fully extended.

(5) CHECK YOUR FOOTGEAR. Any kind of pounding your feet take can cause back pain, especially if your muscles are weak (strong muscles are good shock absorbers) or if you're older (aging spinal discs become thin and hard, providing less cushioning for vertebrae.) Switch to flexible-solid shoes with soft, shock-absorbing cushions and good support. Avoid heels higher than 1 3/4 inches, which shift body weight forward and exaggerate swayback.

(6) LEARN TO LIFT. Never bend over from the waist, even to pick up light

objects. Bending from the waist deprives your spine of the support of the back muscles, which must relax to allow your body to flex. This places abnormal and uneven pressures on spinal discs. Squat close to the object, instead, bending at the knees with your back straight and stomach muscles tensed. Then stand up slowly, holding heavy objects close to your body.

(7) RELAX. Relaxed muscles are less likely to go into painful spasms. People who have been in pain for a while tend to tighten their muscles to guard the area, which makes it almost like a block of concrete. Gentle stretching exercises are a good way to relax muscles. Biofeedback and progressive relaxation training can help you relax, even while you're active.

(8) FIND YOUR PAINLESS POSITION. The key for anyone in acute pain is to rest in a neutral, supportive position. You can lie on your back with several pillows under your legs and your knees somewhat bent. That reduces the stress on your back quite a bit and is usually most comfortable.

If you lie on your side, put a pillow or small roll under your waist and a pillow between your legs.

(9) EXAMINE YOUR MATTRESS. The old recommendation that a firm bed is best for a bad back is being revised. Too many people with aches and pains found that too hard a mattress made them hurt more. Today, back experts recommend a bed that is level, with no sags, and firm enough to support the lower back.

(10) IF YOU'RE OVERWEIGHT, SLIM DOWN. Fat and back pain are an inseparable couple. Especially when that weight is around the waist, people are likely to have back problems. The weight greatly stresses soft back tissues and compresses discs. For maximum back protection and surest weight loss, combine diet with exercise.