

Health and well-being

FACT SHEET

BACK HEALTH:

Obviously we all hope to avoid back pain altogether, but many of us find it hard to keep up the right sort of exercise and avoid the habits that are bad for our backs. So what should we be doing to protect our spines?

Keeping fit

Your body must stay active to be healthy. If your muscles, bones and tendons fall into disuse they'll start to grumble and groan - especially in an area as complex as the back. So keep them moving.

Gentle exercise can build strong back and stomach muscles to support your spine and maintain flexibility. Walking or cycling is easy to incorporate into your daily lifestyle. Swimming is particularly good for backs, because it strengthens your muscles while supporting your body with water - but some strokes may not suit you, so try and get professional advice.

Getting started

A regular routine of exercises is also a good idea, but if you have a bad back, you should consult your doctor or physiotherapist about what exercise is safe. Try and get a personal assessment: a qualified physiotherapist, osteopath or chiropractor can give you an exercise routine tailored to your own needs. If you go to an exercise class, check it's run by a qualified teacher and that the teacher knows you have a bad back. Remember, a lot of commonly performed exercises may not be suitable for you.

Exercise checklist

DO:

- Choose exercise suitable to your level - if you are a beginner, work up gradually
- Take things at your own pace
- Make sure you drink water before, during and after exercise
- Do gentle warm-up stretches before and after exercising
- Wear good footwear and appropriate clothing
- Enjoy yourself

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DON'T:

- Continue with an activity if it makes your back hurt
- Eat a large meal before exercising
- Do fitness or aerobic exercises on a stone or concrete floor
- Exercise if you feel ill
- Do exercise that will put weight or excessive strain on an acutely painful joint or spine

Keeping trim

Since excess weight can pull the spine out of alignment and cause a back injury, it's important to keep your weight down. Do some aerobic exercises such as cycling, walking or running to help you lose the excess pounds. (However, keep in mind that some popular sports, such as golf & tennis, can actually injure your back if not done properly.)

It's also important to maintain a healthy diet that's high in fruits, grains and vegetables. In addition to causing weight gain, a poor diet can also make your back weaker and more susceptible to injury.

At home

- Don't stand with a bent back. Try and make sure work surfaces are at a comfortable height
- Don't stretch too far when painting or cleaning: use a stable chair or ladder rather than reaching
- Don't bend over when cleaning the bath, dusting the skirting boards or reaching low shelves: squat or kneel instead
- Upright vacuum cleaners are better for your back than the kind that needs to be dragged. Keep the vacuum close to your body, and use short sweeping movements backwards and forwards

Top tip

The best way to sit down is to do it without bending your back. Stand in front of the chair with one foot behind the other, almost under the chair. Bend your knees, and at the same time place your hands on the arms or seat of the chair. Then lower yourself gently into the seat. A chair with arms makes this much easier.

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With the kids

- Bend your knees and don't twist when picking up a baby
- Kneel down to troublesome toddlers rather than picking them up
- Rather than bending to lift small children, encourage them to climb up by holding both their hands, while you stay standing
- Adjust the height of cots so that you don't need to bend too much
- If your pram has a shopping tray beneath it, always bend down from the knees to load and unload it

At the shops

- Don't 'shop till you drop'. Take rests, and make several short trips if necessary
- Don't overload your shopping trolley, and try to use the high 'tray' trolleys
- Try to evenly distribute your shopping between both hands, or hold a loaded bag in front of you
- Wear comfortable low shoes

In the car

- Adjust your seat properly, so that arms are relaxed and bent to the steering wheel
- Try supporting your lower back with a small cushion or rolled-up towel
- Take regular breaks on long journeys, and have a stroll and a stretch

In bed

- If your mattress is sagging, it's time to consider getting a new one
- If you have trouble sleeping, try lying on your back with a pillow under your knees, or sleeping on your side with your knees bent and a pillow between them
- Your pillow should support your neck, too many pillows can cause neck strain
- Your bed should be a height which makes it easy to get into and out of. When getting in, sit on the edge, lower your body on to one elbow and shoulder and draw up your knees and then feet. Reverse the procedure to get out
- Don't assume that a bed marked 'orthopaedic' is what you need - the word can sometimes be used as a marketing tool

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Top tips

- Back pain can be caused by so many factors; run through your daily routine (sleep, work, transport - even play) and examine the amount of strain you place on your spine.
- Reduce your stress levels: stress can create muscle tension, causing a loss in flexibility that can lead to back pain. To reduce stress, try exercise, yoga, meditation, getting more sleep or listening to music
- Stop smoking: it puts you at increased risk for back problems since your blood has trouble delivering oxygen to working tissues, making your back weaker

At work

Employers have a responsibility to ensure their employees don't get back problems as a result of working practices. They can face prosecution if they fail to identify and assess risks to staff and fail to take preventative measures to overcome those found.

Employees also have a responsibility to look after their own backs but they should be properly trained in back care by their employer. The government is keen workers get as much information and advice about back care as possible.

- Take regular quick breaks to do simple stretching exercises - for at least one minute every hour
- Sit up straight in a chair that supports your lower back
- When using a keyboard, adjust your seat height so that your forearms are horizontal and your elbows at right angles and both feet are flat on the ground.
- Try to mix your tasks so you aren't making the same movements for hours.