Caring for Your Back:
Tips on Preventing and Managing Back Pain

Eight out of ten adults suffer from low back pain at some point in their life, according to the National Institutes of Health. The condition can be experienced as a sharp pain or a dull, aching pain that varies in intensity, and it’s equally common among men and women. The good news is that back pain can be prevented or managed, and even severe back pain can be treated.

What Do the Doctors Say?

Doctors define two main types of back pain:
- Short-term, or acute, back pain lasts a few days to a few weeks.
- Chronic back pain is discomfort that lasts for twelve weeks or more.

What Causes Back Pain?

There are many possible causes, but back pain often results from muscle or ligament damage due to lifting something heavy, making an abrupt movement, or being in an accident. Age-related changes, including arthritis, can also cause short-term or chronic back pain. Leading an inactive lifestyle is another trigger, especially when someone who rarely exercises participates in a strenuous activity. Weight is an additional cause of back pain, according to the North American Spine Society. Additional weight puts a strain on your back. Keep within 10 lbs. of your ideal weight for a healthier back.

Treating Back Pain

If your back is hurting, consult with your doctor for recommendations and treatment. Sometimes, common types of back pain will improve if you reduce normal physical activity for a few days. However, according to the National Institutes of Health, it’s a myth that complete bed rest is recommended for back pain.

These tips can help to relieve back pain:

- To reduce pain and swelling, take acetaminophen (Tylenol), naproxen (Aleve), or ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin IB) according to the package instructions.
- Apply an ice pack to the painful area for the first 48 to 72 hours. After that, use a heating pad to relax the muscles.
- Wait at least 6 weeks before lifting heavy objects or doing activities that will twist your back.
Do I Need a Rehabilitation Program?

For back pain that's chronic or disabling, a rehabilitation program can be designed to address the type and severity of your condition. The goal is to help you manage pain, improve your movement, and get you back to normal work and leisure activities. Consult with your doctor or health care provider for their recommendations and if a rehabilitation program is needed. Your program may include:

- Pain management techniques
- Walking and movement therapy
- An exercise program
- Stress management training
- Nutritional counseling
- Smoking cessation counseling
- Ergonomic assessments
- Education and counseling
- Help with obtaining assistive medical devices
- Injections for pain relief
- Nerve block therapy

Sleeping to Help Back Pain

To alleviate back stress, try lying on your side while holding a pillow between your knees. Your knees should be slightly bent and drawn up toward your body. If you must sleep on your back, put a pillow beneath your knees. Sleeping on your stomach is not recommended.

Did you know? Aerobic activities can promote healing by improving blood flow to your back. Weight training will strengthen your muscles and improve your posture and flexibility. Consult with your doctor or health care provider about the benefits of exercise and if certain exercises to help your back are appropriate for you.

For more information on back health, visit the following resources:

- North American Spine Society
  knowyourback.org/pages/backpainprevention/lifestylechoices/tentips.aspx

- National Library of Medicine
  nlm.nih.gov

Prevention is the Best Medicine!

Follow these tips to help keep your back in good shape:

- Wear supportive, cushioned shoes for walking. Don’t wear high heels.
- When using a computer, sit in a chair with an adjustable seat, back, and armrests. Get expert advice on adjusting the settings.
- While sitting, use a stool under your feet so that your knees are higher than your hips.
- Avoid standing for long periods. If you have to stand for work, take breaks when possible. Consider placing a stool by your feet and alternate resting each foot on the stool.
- Place a backrest or a small pillow or rolled towel behind your lower back while sitting or driving.
- If driving for a long period, stop and walk around every hour.
- Quit smoking. Smoking may reduce the blood supply to your back, leading to disk degeneration.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Talk to your doctor about starting an exercise program.
- Learn relaxation techniques, as stress is a cause of back pain.

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