

**be well** body



# no more back pain

Our ultimate guide to staying strong and ache-free by Megan McMorris

**W**hen you think of epidemics, back pain probably doesn't come to mind—but maybe it should. Roughly 80 percent of us will experience it at some point, according to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. It's a leading reason why people miss work (accounting for an estimated 83 million sick days each year), and it can be expensive: We spend more than \$85 billion a year searching for relief, reports a study in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Back pain is hardly a new problem, but it does seem to be more common these days. Incidence of lower back pain, in particular, has increased over the past 40 years, according to a study published in the journal *Rheumatology*. It's not clear why it's on the rise, but some experts think obesity and a lack of activity may play a role. "They can certainly make recovery harder and recurrence more likely," says Hector Rodriguez, DO, an osteopath and associate professor at

Pacific University in Pacific Grove, Oregon. Also, carrying excess pounds physically stresses your joints and muscles, and not moving around enough causes tension and stiffness.

While some back pain is acute—meaning it comes on suddenly, like when you move a heavy piece of furniture or play a demanding sport without adequately training—much of the time it's a series of smaller, everyday habits that add up to chronic (Please turn to 108)

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CONTINUED aches and pains.

“Everything from sitting hunched over at your computer to wearing the wrong shoes can lead to discomfort,” says Dr. Rodriguez. The encouraging news: Back pain can often be prevented with easy tweaks that you can make throughout the day.

### 7 a.m. hinge, don't bend

Most of us wake up, grab a toothbrush and round our back as we lean over the sink. Stop right there! Instead of bending and curving your back, which puts pressure on the disks and spinal nerve roots, what you really want to do is hinge from your hips. That means keeping your back as flat as possible as you tilt forward, says Esther Gokhale, author of *8 Steps to a Pain-Free Back*. Keep that in mind anytime you lean forward, whether you're putting on makeup or reaching for something in the back of your closet.

### 7:30 a.m. put on an invisible corset

A strong spine is one that has support—and that comes from the deepest abdominal and back muscles in your core, which stabilize your torso. Exercises that strengthen your entire core can help (see page 113 for examples), but it's also important to be conscious of using these muscles throughout the day. An easy way to do it: Pretend that you're wearing an invisible corset underneath your clothes, says Gokhale. In the morning, imagine that you're putting one on: Sit upright with vertebrae stacked (place the fingertips of your left hand on your lower back to check that your spine is not rounded or arched). Now reach upward with your right hand and a little forward, as if you're reaching for the top of a high shelf. Reach the left hand to meet the right, keeping arms parallel and stretched upward as far as you can. Hold for 10 seconds while you

imagine someone lacing up the corset, then slowly lower your arms and relax your shoulders, making sure that you don't slouch. Repeat anytime you catch yourself slouching.

### 8 a.m. choose the right shoes

For everyday, think low and wide (a thick, sturdy heel, ideally no higher than 2 inches). High heels can cause your back to arch, so save the stilettos for when you're not on your feet very much, like at a dinner party. Flats aren't a great pick for every day either, since they usually don't have adequate arch support. “The best type of shoe for your back is one whose sole curves on the inner side of the foot, like a kidney bean. It should also have pronounced arch support and a shock-absorbent sole,” says Gokhale.

### 9 a.m. don't sit up straight

Pin-straight posture actually makes your lower back tense up; the best sitting position is one in which your lower back retains its natural curve, while your upper back stays straight. “Think of it as if you have a tail, and you want your tail to be behind you rather than sitting on it,” says Gokhale. That means your bottom should stick out behind you very slightly; the small of your back should be curved but not arched.

### 10 a.m. stop pressing send

Get up and walk over to your coworker to ask about that report instead of sending another email, suggests Dr. Rodriguez. “Sitting in one position all day is the worst thing you can do because it puts pressure on the disks in your lower back,” he says. Experts suggest getting out of your chair and walking around every hour.

Being on your feet all day isn't great for your back, either. Periodically shifting your body weight from one leg to the other can help. “Even a (Please turn to 111)

# pain relief, please!

Back pain often goes away on its own—90 percent of people will get better within 4 to 6 weeks without doing anything, reports the Mayo Clinic—but you want to feel better *now*. While there are several home and over-the-counter remedies that you can try on your own, it's a good idea to visit your primary-care doc anytime the pain is bad, not improving, or you're not sure what caused it (you can't trace it to a specific event/injury), says Jaclyn H. Bonder, MD, director of women's health rehabilitation at the Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine in New York City. The doctor will evaluate you to pinpoint the cause of the pain and if necessary, refer you to a specialist. What treatments work? Here's what you should know about ...

□ **Heat vs. ice** If you injured your back within the past 48 to 72 hours, start by applying ice wrapped in a towel or cloth for 20 minute-periods of time to bring down the swelling and inflammation. After that, or if you suffer from chronic pain, stick with heat to soothe achy muscles and joints. A heating pad will do, or try menthol patches (like Bengay Pain Relieving Patch).

□ **Medication** If your pain is mild (less than 5 on a scale of 1 to 10), reach for over-the-counter anti-inflammatories (such as Aleve and Advil), says Sheila Dugan, MD, a physiatrist at Rush University Medical Center. For more severe pain that limits your movement, your doctor may need to prescribe a muscle relaxant like Flexeril and/or pain medication like Vicodin. If pain radiates down your leg, an epidural cortisone injection may help.

□ **Massage** It's a great fix for pain due to tight muscles. Research has shown that acupressure and shiatsu (both trigger-point techniques in which the practitioner pushes on certain points in your body) work better than traditional Swedish massage for lower back pain. If the pain isn't muscular but in the spine itself, skip the massage and head straight to your doctor.

□ **Physical therapy** If you've been in pain for 4 weeks or more, physical therapy may help (ask your doctor for a recommendation). A therapist will use a variety of techniques to relieve the pain, and prescribe a stretching and strengthening program. She will

also show you how to do the exercises on your own after your sessions end, says Dr. Dugan. If you suspect that your desk setup may be the problem, ask the therapist to come to your office to evaluate it or take photos to show her.

□ **Chiropractic care** A chiropractor uses hands-on manipulation to realign your spine. That generally entails a lot of moving, stretching, pulling and pressing on your back as well as on your arms and legs. (Don't be surprised if you hear a few cracks or pops.) Studies on the effectiveness of chiropractic adjustments have been mixed, though the field has gained some credibility in the past 10 years (in part thanks to more stringent guidelines for practitioners).

□ **Acupuncture** Yes, it works! In fact, a study of 638 lower-back-pain patients, published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*, found that 10 sessions worked better than standard solutions like medication or physical therapy. If an alternative approach appeals to you, your doctor may be able to give you a recommendation. Or you can search for a licensed acupuncturist (LAc) at [nccaom.org](http://nccaom.org).

□ **Surgery** This is usually a last resort. Situations that might warrant surgery include radiating pain down the back of the leg or weakness on one side, which can signal that the spinal nerves are compressed. But rest assured: "Back surgery is becoming much more minimally invasive, involves less tissue and has a shorter recovery phase than ever before," says Dr. Dugan.

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CONTINUED little bit of motion will help relieve the pressure,” says Dr. Rodriguez.

**12 p.m. lighten your load**

The average woman lugs around the equivalent of a 15-month-old toddler in her handbag, according to a recent survey. That can put a major strain on your shoulders and, in turn, your back. Ideally, you should tote no more than 10 percent of your body weight (so that’s 15 pounds max if you weigh 150). But you can also be smarter about how you carry it: Start with a bag that has a relatively short strap so it fits just under your arm, which keeps the weight as close to your body as possible. Then use your elbow to nudge the bag slightly behind you. Keeping the weight close to your spine helps to ease the pressure, and it also settles your shoulders into a rolled-back and down position as you walk, says Gokhale. Another option: Switch to a cross-body bag or backpack to more evenly distribute the weight.

**3 p.m. learn to glide** Turn your afternoon coffee break into a back-soother by “glidewalking” for 10 minutes. The idea is to train yourself to walk in a smooth, fluid motion, rather than plodding along heavily as so many of us do. Start by standing tall, then shift your weight onto your left leg. Bring your right knee up as if you were going to take a step forward and let the leg relax. Tighten the left buttock and press the left heel into the ground as you gently place the right foot on the ground, heel first, with knees slightly bent. Shift weight onto right leg and repeat on alternating sides as you move forward. This method strengthens the glutes while stretching the psoas muscle, which is part of the hip flexor,

says Gokhale. With some practice, you’ll eventually get used to this as your new way of walking.

**6 p.m. get smart about groceries**

Reaching for high cupboards and bending over low refrigerator shelves can put your back out of whack, so if you find yourself doing that, it may be time to do a little reorganizing. To minimize strain, place the groceries and dishes that you use most often at hip- to shoulder-height. And when you lift grocery bags (or anything else that’s heavy), bend at your knees. “That transfers the weight to your legs and prevents straining your back,” says Dr. Rodriguez.

**8 p.m. tune in, stretch out**

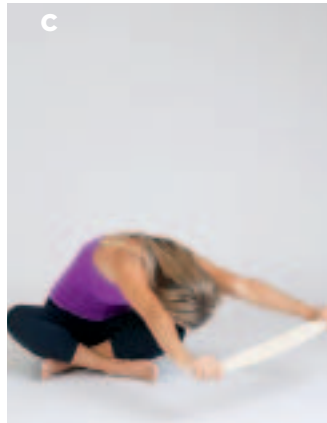
When relaxing on the couch in front of the TV, stretch your back by lying on your side with a pillow underneath your head, says Gokhale. Tip pelvis forward and bend knees about 120 degrees in a “zigzag” position. Elongate spine and lengthen neck onto pillow. Roll whichever shoulder is facing up backward once. After about 10 to 15 minutes, switch sides.

**10 p.m. sleep right** During sleep, your back heals itself from the day’s twists and turns; help it by starting out in a soothing, spine-lengthened position, suggests Gokhale. Lie on your back and bend your knees so your feet are flat on the mattress. Bend your arms at 90 degrees at your sides so you can come up onto your elbows, digging them into the mattress so you can stretch your back. Hold for 30 seconds, then release and lie down again, straightening legs. Can’t fall asleep on your back? Turn on your side and place a pillow between your legs so your spine stays properly aligned. (For back-strengthening exercises, please turn the page.)

# 3 MOVES FOR A STRONG, HEALTHY BACK

by Denise Austin

Preventing back pain is all about strengthening and stretching your spine as well as your back and abdominal muscles—all of which support your back. Do these moves 3 to 5 times a week and your back will be as strong (and pain-free) as ever!



## ▲ SPINE STRETCH

**Works the muscles that support your spine** **A.** Sit on the floor with your legs crossed and arms extended straight overhead, with one end of a towel in each hand. **B.** Tilt your upper body to the left about 30 degrees, keeping butt (both cheeks!) on the floor. Hold for 5

seconds. **C.** Roll your body forward so that you're facing the floor and your chest is a few inches from left knee. Hold for 5 seconds. **D.** Sit up and extend arms in front of you. Keeping abs tight, twist from side to side for about 10 seconds. Return to start position (A) and do B and C again on the opposite side.



## ▲ BACK TONER

**Works lower and upper back muscles as well as abs** Start on your hands and knees, back straight. Keeping abs tight and back straight, extend right leg behind you while extending left arm straight out in front of you. Try to get your leg and arm as close to horizontal as possible. Hold for 10 seconds, then lower back down. Do 8 reps, then switch to left leg/right arm and repeat.

## ▼ AB BLASTER

**Works upper and lower abs** Lie on your back with arms and legs extended; hold one end of a towel in each hand. Your arms should be by your ears (straight up over your head) and your body should be in one straight line from fingers to toes. Contract the abs and lift your shoulders, arms and upper back off the ground as you also lift your feet and legs. Don't go past 90 degrees when lifting legs (your lower back should stay on the floor the whole time). Hold for 5 seconds, then lower back down. Do 10 reps.



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