

Quick Tips to a Healthier Back

Following any period of prolonged inactivity, begin a program of regular low-impact exercises. Speed walking, swimming, or stationary bike riding 30 minutes a day can increase muscle strength and flexibility. Yoga can also help stretch and strengthen muscles and improve posture. Ask your physician or orthopedist for a list of low-impact exercises appropriate for your age and designed to strengthen lower back and abdominal muscles.

- Always stretch before exercise or other strenuous physical activity.
- Don't slouch when standing or sitting. When standing, keep your weight balanced on your feet. Your back supports weight most easily when curvature is reduced.
- At home or work, make sure your work surface is at a comfortable height for you.
- Sit in a chair with good lumbar support and proper position and height for the task. Keep your shoulders back. Switch sitting positions often and periodically walk around the office or gently stretch muscles to relieve tension. A pillow or rolled-up towel placed behind the small of your back can provide some lumbar support. If you must sit for a long period of time, rest your feet on a low stool or a stack of books.
- Wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes.
- Sleep on your side to reduce any curve in your spine. Always sleep on a firm surface.
- Ask for help when transferring an ill or injured family member from a reclining to a sitting position or when moving the patient from a chair to a bed.
- Don't try to lift objects too heavy for you. Lift with your knees, pull in your stomach muscles, and keep your head down and in line with your straight back. Keep the object close to your body. Do not twist when lifting.
- Maintain proper nutrition and diet to reduce and prevent excessive weight, especially weight around the waistline that taxes lower back muscles. A diet with sufficient daily intake of calcium, phosphorus, and vitamin D helps to promote new bone growth.
- If you smoke, quit. Smoking reduces blood flow to the lower spine and causes the spinal discs to degenerate.

Reference:

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, National Institutes of Health,
http://www.ninds.nih.gov/health_and_medical/pubs/back_pain.htm#tip



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Lifting with Proper Posture

Lifting is strenuous—it requires proper training and technique. By lifting with your large, strong leg muscles instead of the small muscles of the back, you can prevent back injuries and reduce lower back pain. There are five steps to follow when lifting an object:

1. GET CLOSE TO THE LOAD

Get as close to the load as possible—as if you're hugging the object. Having the object close to your body puts less force on your lower back.

2. MAINTAIN YOUR CURVES.

Keep yourself in an upright position while squatting to pick up.

3. TIGHTEN YOUR STOMACH MUSCLES

Tightening the stomach helps support the spine. Don't hold your breath while tightening the muscles.

4. LIFT WITH YOUR LEGS

Your legs are the strongest muscles in your body—so use them.

5. PIVOT DON'T TWIST

Turn with your feet, not your back. It isn't built for twisting from side to side.



Large or Heavy Loads

If a load is too heavy to lift alone, ask for help. Pick one person to coach the lift—this way you lift and lower at the same time.

Overhead Loads

If a load is above your shoulders, use a step stool to elevate yourself until the load is at least chest level—preferably waist height. Pull the object close to your body and then lift. Remember to maintain your curves—use your arms and legs to do the work.

Reference:

*Division of Safety, Office of Research Services, National Institutes of Health,
<http://www.nih.gov/od/ors/ds/ergonomics/shops.html>*