



A guide to preventing low back pain

Back facts

- Back pain does not necessarily mean that you have a back injury.
- Most North Americans will have back pain at some time in their lives.
- Many different factors can work together to cause back pain.
- Most back pain comes from
 - Muscles, ligaments, and joints in the back not moving the way they should
 - Pushing, pulling, lifting, or carrying more weight than your body can handle
- Muscle tension can cause spasm resulting in pain.
- Smokers and people with previous back pain are more likely to get back pain.

Back myths

Myth: “I have a slipped disc.”

Fact: It is impossible for a disc to slip “out of place.” Discs can bulge or herniate, however.

Myth: Back pain is usually caused by a pinched nerve.

Fact: Pinched nerves are very uncommon.

Myth: Prolonged rest is the best treatment for back pain.

Fact: Bed rest for more than a day or two is bad for your back. The best thing to do is to get mobile as soon as possible (for example, go for a walk).

Myth: Taking a pain killer or muscle relaxant will cure back pain.

Fact: Pain killers and muscle relaxants often mask the pain so that we think we are better. We may then move in ways that do not allow the injury to heal.

Back posture

Your spine is one of the strongest parts of your body. It is strongest in its natural curves. When you put your back in a position that does not follow the natural curves, the back has to work harder to do the same job. Poor posture fatigues the muscles faster and over time can produce back pain.

Where possible, the following back postures should be avoided because they do not maintain the natural curves of the spine:

Forward bending



Twisting



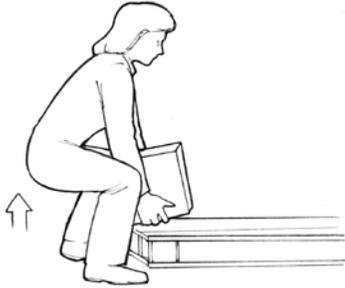
Extreme side bending



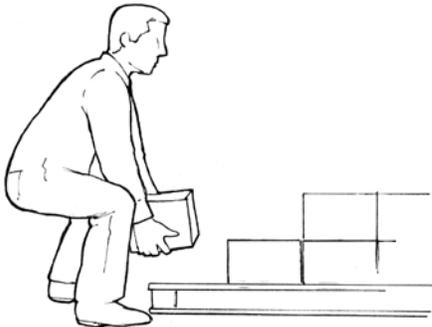
Risk factor combinations

Back pain is caused by many factors. When two or more risk factors are present at the same time, you are at a much higher risk of injury. The most common poor postures used when handling objects are forward bending, twisting, and extreme side bending.

- When lifting loads, use a two-handed grip where practical and maintain a straight back with your head up.



- When repetitively handling objects, turn your body by moving your feet and getting into a stable position.



- When you need to do the same task for a long period of time, try to change your posture as often as possible.



Exercises

People who are physically fit generally get less back pain, and they recover faster from back injuries.

Remember: A little exercise every day can make a huge difference. The following are some exercises often recommended to enhance fitness. Consult your health professional for exercises that are suitable for you.

Stretching exercises

Back extension



Hamstring stretch



Side bend

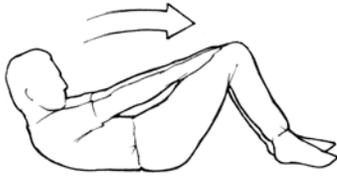


Knee to chest stretch



Abdominal strengthening

Partial sit-up



Possible activities

Exercise in a way that does not aggravate your back pain. Walking, cycling, and swimming are often good activities.

Tips for preventing back pain

- Lifting:
 - Keep the object as close to you as possible (use a bear hug).
 - Balance the load you are carrying between both hands.
 - Minimize the distance you reach when picking up an object.
- Stretch to keep your lower back and legs flexible.
- Keep your abdominal muscles strong.
- Your back is designed for movement. Don't stay in a poor or awkward position for extended periods. Don't sit or stand for extended periods without changing your posture. When you start to feel fatigued, it is an indication that you have been in that position for too long.
- Don't just rely on pain killers for backaches; exercise and get moving.
- Throughout the day, pay attention to keeping your natural back curves.
- Wear comfortable and well-supported shoes.
- Sleep on a firm mattress.
- If you sleep on your side, place a pillow between your knees.



For more information

This document is not meant to replace your health professional. It is particularly important to seek professional advice if back pain spreads down your leg, especially below the knee, and is accompanied by weakness, tingling, or numbness.

Read the WorkSafeBC publication *Back Talk*, available online at WorkSafeBC.com.

Visit the Safety at Work centre at WorkSafeBC.com.

Contact your local WorkSafeBC office, or call the WorkSafeBC Prevention Information Line at 604 276-3100 in the Lower Mainland or 1 888 621-7233 (621-SAFE) toll-free in the rest of B.C.