

Back Pain Advice

Back pain, is unfortunately, a very normal part of human life. This is not to say everyone has 'severe' episodes, or bouts of sciatica, but 4/5 of us will experience it at some point (around 70% having another episode within 2 years). However, because back pain is relatively 'normal', this does not mean it is inevitable and all episodes were destined to happen. A common misconception is people think their back was 'fine', then they 'put it out' doing something. However, back pain is like heart disease in that problems develop due to the cumulative effect of various 'risk factors', and many problems often precede a pain episode. If we look after our health, and backs, episodes and reoccurrence become much less likely (and subsequent bouts milder & quicker to pass)! I have compiled this help sheet to highlight the risk-factors (*most can be mitigated) for developing back pain, and essential advice on how to care for our backs:

Back Pain risk factors*:

- **Lack of strength in the muscles supporting the spine & pelvis (i.e. spinal, glutes, deep abdominals).**
- **Loss of flexibility and mobility in the spine (leading to poor spine health/circulation).**
- **Decline in physical fitness (i.e. lack of cardio-vascular exercise).**
- Poor posture & slouching in chairs.
- Stress, depression & trauma.
- Faulty body mechanics (i.e. moving/bending/lifting/reaching badly).
- Ergonomic Problems (eg. poorly designed seating/working station, work layout unsuitability).
- Smoking and excessive alcohol and drug usage (including some prescribed).
- Hypermobility, or instability of the spine.
- Standing or sitting in static positions for long periods of time.
- Being overweight, or severely underweight.
- Poor diet.
- Lack of rest/fatigue.
- Weakened bones (i.e. osteopenia & osteoporosis) – mineral and Vitamin D deficiencies
- Congenital defects (e.g. Unequal leg length, spinal defects).
- Soft-tissue (muscle/fascia) stiffness/tightness.
- Muscle imbalances and biomechanical problems.
- Repetitive wear and tear/RSI from work, sports or hobbies.
- Scar tissue and muscle weakness from repeated surgeries.
- Traumatic injuries.

How to limit the risk of back pain:

- **Strengthen your back, core and deep abdominals 3 x per week. Get a Pilates teacher, Sports Therapist, Physio or PT with back/rehab experience to tech you the exercises.**
 - If your hamstrings are too tight and your lumbar spine too flat, focus on stretching your hamstrings and strengthening your core, hip flexors (i.e. psoas) and glutes.
 - If you have too much lumbar curve and your pelvis tilts forward, focus on stretching your quads, hip flexors and strengthening your core & glutes.
- **Do mobility exercises to keep your back/spine healthy, a yoga class 2 x week is great for this.**
- **Stretch your back and tight leg/hip/gluteal muscles daily.**
- If you are hypermobile/very flexible, your focus should be on strengthening the muscles (don't do too much stretching/yoga, except on known tight muscle groups).
- If you are a stiff/inflexible individual, then more time needs to be spent stretching the muscles (though strengthening still very important).

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- Keep your posture good (upright, chest open, neck long, tailbone tucked under, core engaged).
- Do not slouch in chairs, sit too long with legs crossed or sleep on one side with one knee out.
- Try to avoid stress, or learn stress reduction techniques. Get treatment/counselling or CBT for depression. See a Counsellor or Trauma Healer to help let go of past traumas.
- Always be mindful of how you move/bend/lift – bend your knees, keep your back flat (core engaged), don't twist when weight bearing, keep load close to body.
- Get your seating and workstation assessed and insist it is amended appropriately. Ensure your chair supports your lower back & consider a standing desk or kneeling chair.
- Give up smoking, cut down on alcohol use and avoid recreational/non-essential prescription drugs.
- Avoid standing or sitting for long periods. Get up or sit down regularly – stretch and mobilise!
- Have a regular massage to address muscular tension, or Osteopath appointment for spinal stiffness.
- Have a Sports Therapist or Physio help you address any muscle imbalances or biomechanical problems such as hyperlordosis, tortioned pelvis, flat-back syndrome or hyperkyphosis.
- Ensure you get enough quality rest – don't burn the candle at both ends.
- Loose weight if required – eat plenty of fruit, veg and pulses. Avoid junk food.
- If you can adapt your work/sport/hobby to reduce strain, then make these changes (ergonomics, special equipment, bending properly, don't overreach etc).
- Don't do anything which carries an excessive risk of back injury – ask for help when required.
- If you have weak bones, or are a post-menopausal woman, take a quality multi designed for bone health (High vitamin D, Calcium, Magnesium and other supportive minerals).
- Back surgery should be a last resort – only if in severe pain, and hands on (i.e. Clinical Massage/Bodywork or Osteopathy – Dr's can't do this!) and rehab (i.e. Physio, Sports Therapist, PT) approaches have not worked.

I hope you found this help sheet beneficial. I know we cannot mitigate all back pain risk factors, but we can reduce them giving our backs a better chance to heal and avoid future bouts!

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