

Back on track

Bothered by back pain? Here's how to say "so long" to soreness with a few simple moves.

PHOTO: ADAM ALBRIGHT

Has your back ever felt so stiff that even reaching for your shoes causes pain? Join the crowd. "Sixty percent of all adults will experience debilitating back pain that prevents them from going to work or school for a week at some point in their life," says Charles Rosen, M.D., associate clinical professor of spine surgery at the University of California, Irvine College of Medicine and founding director of the UC Irvine Spine Center in Orange, California.

WHAT'S BEHIND THAT ACHE?

All back pain results from trauma to the discs—the cushiony spacers between the vertebrae that allow for shock absorption, explains Rosen. Trauma can result from a specific event such as a car accident or the cumulative effect of years of activity like digging or lifting. The wear and tear that comes with age can also make the back more prone to injury. Your best defense against back pain: Shape up! Boosting your back and abdominal strength, flexibility and cardiovascular endurance are key to keeping your back in feel-good condition.

The good news: You don't have to be a svelte size 8 to maintain a healthy back. "No studies I know of indicate that weight per se causes back pain," says Rosen. "If you work out and have strong back and abdominal muscles, you can be heavy but in good shape."

WATCH YOUR BACK

Pilates, which focuses on the body's core muscles (the back and abs), is a terrific form of back-friendly exercise, but anything that increases flexibility and strengthens the core is good. Physical therapy and exercising to Pilates DVDs helped Brette Sember, 37, the Clarence, New York, author of *Your Plus-Size Pregnancy*, (Barricade Books, October 2005) handle her back pain. "Strengthening my core was the answer for me," she says. "Today, I'm almost completely pain-free, and I walk two miles a day."

One warning: Steer clear of moves that stress the lumbar spine (which supports your lower back). Avoid bending forward to lift weights up or twisting at the torso.

GIVE YOUR BACK A BREAK

Besides being fit, here are other ways to protect your hard-working back:

1. LIFT CORRECTLY. Position yourself so what you're lifting is directly in front of you, not off to the side (which would require you to twist). And you've heard it a million times, but it bears repeating: Lift with your legs, not your back! And when it comes to heavy lifting, enlist the help of a friend or two.



2. GET DOWN. When doing something on the ground—planting bulbs in the garden, for example—lower yourself to ground level rather than bending over from the waist, which ups the disc pressure.



3. AVOID BENDING AND TWISTING. The combination of bending over and twisting at the waist is notorious for causing a disc tear, Dr. Rosen says. Even a common move like reaching into your car's trunk for your laptop or suitcase can wrench your back.



EASY PAIN REMEDIES

If you're bugged by back pain there are several things you can do. First up, an Rx you can enjoy: Chill out with a massage or tai chi class. "It's well known that stress and depression heighten pain, including back pain, so try relaxation techniques such as massage, tai chi, meditation and yoga, which can ease pressure on the back," suggests Miriam E. Nelson, Ph.D., director of the John Hancock Center for Physical Activity and Nutrition at Tufts University in Massachusetts, a member of the team of LLuminari experts and author of *Strong Women, Strong Backs: Everything You Need to Know to Prevent, Treat, and Beat Back Pain* (Putnam, September 2006).

Another prescription for lessening that pain: Practice good ergonomics. In other words, consider the way you're asking your body to move and skip the unhealthy contortions. For example, a big no-no many of us are guilty of is cradling the telephone between our ear and shoulder while we cook, type or reorganize the closet. Spare your neck and back by investing in a hands-free headset, using a speakerphone or simply holding the phone in your hand. If you log lots of desk time, make sure that your setup is back-friendly. (Visit osba.gov and search for "computer workstations" for information on creating a comfortable workspace.)

In addition, dump the slump while sitting and standing, and your back will thank you. "Slumping posture can cause back pain because it can affect the proper alignment of the spine," Nelson says. Stand and sit up tall, and you're likely to notice an improvement. When you hit the sack at night, sleep on a firm surface and try lying on your side with a pillow between your knees, or on your back with a pillow beneath your knees. And in the morning, leave the stilettos in the closet. Stylish though they may be, comfortable, low-heeled shoes are better for your back.

WHEN TO CALL THE DOCTOR

Rosen says that "Ninety percent of back pain goes away on its own within a week." To ease your discomfort during that time, rest and take an anti-inflammatory drug such as Motrin or Advil. If you aren't improving or are getting worse after two or three days, the pain is intolerable or you experience a change in bladder or bowel patterns (which could signal a serious condition needing immediate treatment), contact your doctor.

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EASY WAYS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR BACK

Try these strengthening moves from Chris Mallett, DPT, CSCS, owner of ATP Specific Training and Physical Therapy in South Pasadena, California.

- **Do crunches slowly** and exhale during the upward motion. You also can do crunches with rotation. (Rotate your upper body so that your shoulder is pointing toward the opposite knee.) Start with eight reps on each side.
- **Sit on a fitness ball** and with a wall behind you for support, take turns lifting each leg straight out in front of you. Work up to 10 reps.
- **Get down on your hands and knees.** Keeping your spine neutral, lift your left arm and right leg off the floor. Hold this pose for five seconds and then repeat on the other side.



Our expert, Kristen Finello, is a New Jersey-based writer for women's health magazines such as *Fitness*.