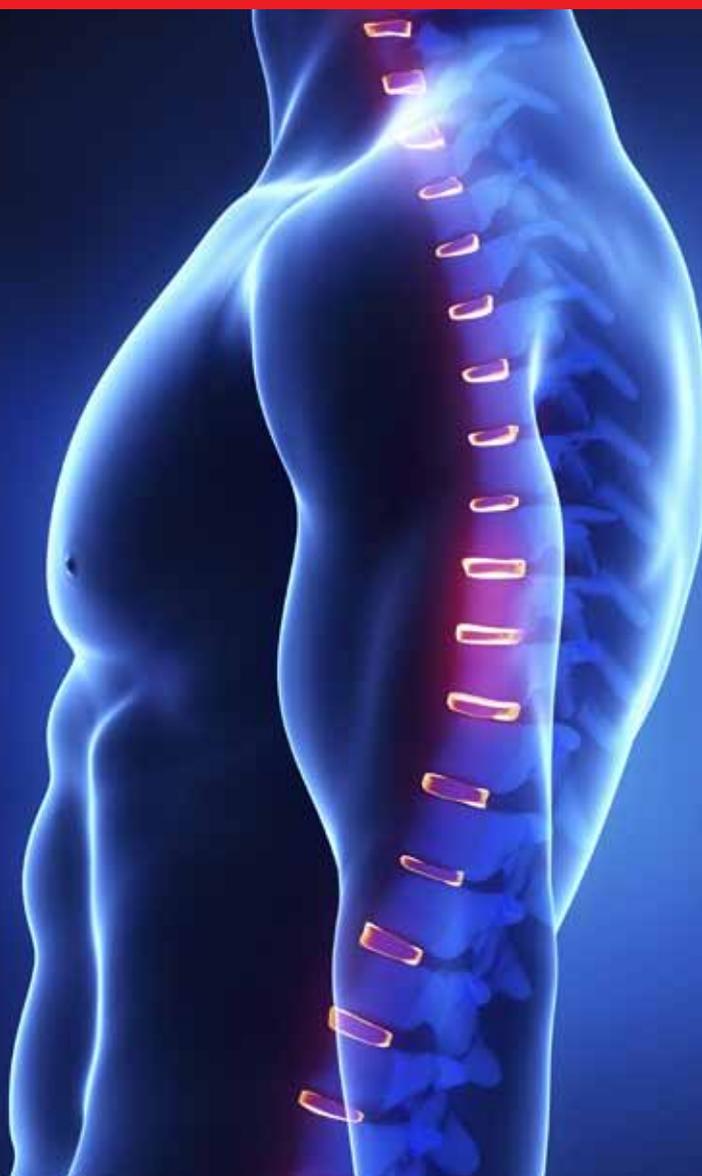


BACK-UP PLAN

Keeping your spine in tip-top shape

HEALTH SERIES | ISSUE 05



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WHAT CAUSES BACK PAIN?



Back pain is something you don't consider until you suffer from it – by then you'll be in agony. As many as 98% of people get back pain at some point in their lives, but the good news is that it's easily preventable with a few simple lifestyle changes.

Bad posture is the usual cause of back pain, but with a bit of time and effort, alignment can be easily corrected to keep you healthy and pain-free.

Aches in the spine are often caused by problems with leg strength and alignment. The femur (the thigh

bone) is the biggest bone in the body and governs the lower back. You might have six-pack abs – to some the sign of core strength – but you can still suffer from back pain. If your posture is bad, the femur pulls the hip flexors forward and tightens the hamstrings, leading to aching in the lower back.



Did You Know?

About 98% of the population will experience back pain at some point in their lives.

Back pain can also stem from doing everyday activities: lifting or reaching incorrectly, sitting for hours in an awkward position, carrying a heavy bag, or simply wearing high-heeled shoes. But with a bit of patience, bad alignment can be remedied, and the resulting improved posture will put an end to back pain.

A SHAPELY SPINE

The spine is made up of four curved sections; when you lose that healthy curve through bad posture, that's when back pain can begin.

Too much sitting, over-exercising, or everyday bad posture all can lead to tight muscles, which in turn can lead to back ache. The good news is that it can easily be prevented.

Keeping healthy is fundamental to a long and happy life – and keeping your spine in tip-top shape is no exception.

Dr Caroline Low, a fellow of the American Board of Anti Ageing and Rejuvenation Medicine, says, “Our spine is like the support for a building.

At some point in time, that building will collapse. It's part and parcel of life – but it's what you do to delay the inevitable that's important.”

One of the keys to a healthy spine is maintaining a healthy weight. If you're overweight, it puts more strain on the spine, thus leading to back problems. To see if you have the right height/weight ratio, check your Body Mass Index (BMI) below.

TIP

 One way to ensure a healthy spine is to keep your weight in check.

BMI Categories

<18.5	Underweight
18.5–24.9	Normal
25–29.9	Overweight
>30	Obese

Biting Back

A healthy back starts with strong bones, so a calcium-rich diet is a must.

Calcium-rich foods include sesame seeds, tofu and dark, leafy green vegetables such as kale. For the body to absorb calcium optimally, you also need Vitamin D and magnesium.

Vitamin D levels can be topped up with just 30 minutes' exposure to sunlight a day. Some people can't produce enough of this important vitamin, so do get a doctor to check to see whether you require supplements.

You can get your magnesium from nuts, seeds, grains and vegetables. This mineral helps prevent calcium from depositing in your soft tissues, thus causing a type of arthritis.

Although Dr Low says that most people will get enough of these vitamins and minerals from food alone, she advises that post-menopausal women may need additional supplements.



PREVENTING BACK PAIN: POSTURE

Whether you work in an office, at a manual job, or are a homemaker, there are numerous times throughout the day that you can make small changes in the way you carry out tasks to prevent back pain or injury.



At the office:

Office workers should be mindful of their workstation set-up. After all, they spend on average nine hours a day in front of their computers. The height of your desk, office chair and even the angle of your computer all play a part in creating or alleviating back pain. If you're sitting in the wrong position day after day for long periods of time, problems are very likely to occur.

Pain in the back can start as high up as in the base of the neck. Constant phone calls with the phone wedged

under your chin are not a good idea. If constant calling is part of your working life, switch to a headset instead to stay pain free.

Office workers should ideally walk around for three minutes every half an hour to alleviate back stress. A clever way of making sure you do this is to have only a glass of water at your workstation instead of a big jug, thus giving you an excuse to get up and walk to the pantry at regular intervals. This gives you the chance to stretch your back and remain hydrated.

TIP

- *Align desk, chair and computer to fit your body to ensure proper posture*
- *Use a headset if your job requires constant use of the phone*
- *Walk three minutes for every half hour of work at your workstation*



Doing housework:

Back problems and bad posture are usually caused when you are not properly aligned. Bear in mind that in everything you do you should equalise the pressure on your spine. If you reach up for something use both hands, if you reach down bend at the knees. Even for a task as simple as stacking the dishwasher, it's important to bend at the knees as if you were lifting something heavy. Bending or lifting without bent knees and engaging your core plays havoc with the back.

TIP

Keep knees bent for chores requiring you to reach down, even for light stuff such as stacking the dishwasher.

Travels:

Long journeys can be joyless for the back, so get as comfortable as you can and stretch out as frequently as you can. If you're on an aeroplane, walk along the aisles about every half an hour.

Carrying bags:

Everyone has a tendency to carry too many heavy bags. Remember to carry carefully – again, it's all about equalising and balance. For example, a backpack is preferable to a shoulder bag because it evens the distribution of weight across the spine. If you're carrying groceries home, spread the carriers over two hands instead of using one to carry all that load.

Picking schoolbags:

Think about balance and equalising the pressure so that the entire spine takes the weight, rather than putting undue pressure on portions of the back, resulting in pain. The best option for a schoolbag is thus a backpack.

Yes, messenger bags are the in thing, but these focus the load on one shoulder, which can cause back pain. If your child insists on a bag in this style, advise him to sling it across his body, and perhaps switch shoulders once in a while.

Here are things you should look out for when you purchase a backpack for your school-going children:

1. **Size:** Ensure that the bag is large and deep enough for the items that your child regularly requires for class. Is it tall enough to take all his different folders? Does it have space for his numerous workbooks? Place larger items at the back (next to your child's back) and smaller items at the front to make the bag feel lighter.
2. **Compartments:** Make sure the backpack has numerous exterior pockets for easy access. Does it have a separate padded compartment for laptop/tablet computers? What about special slots for a water bottle and a lunchbox?
3. **Padding & Straps:** The backpack should have comfortable padding and adjustable straps so that your child carries the load at a suitable level on his back. Preferably, the backpack should have straps at the sternum and waist to prevent it from swaying too much, thus stressing the back.
4. **Material:** Leather is classy and ages well, although synthetics last longest. Because the back can get sweaty, consider a backpack with a ventilation mesh.





Flying High 5 Top Tips

1 Back Gain

Use a pillow in the small of your back to prevent slouching and provide maximum support.

2 Feet First

If your child's feet can't reach the floor, use a footrest or a bag to make sure that his knees are slightly above or at least level with his waist. You might want to try this yourself, as this relieves stress on the back.

3 Right Moves

Make sure you get out of your seat every hour for at least five minutes to walk about and stretch.

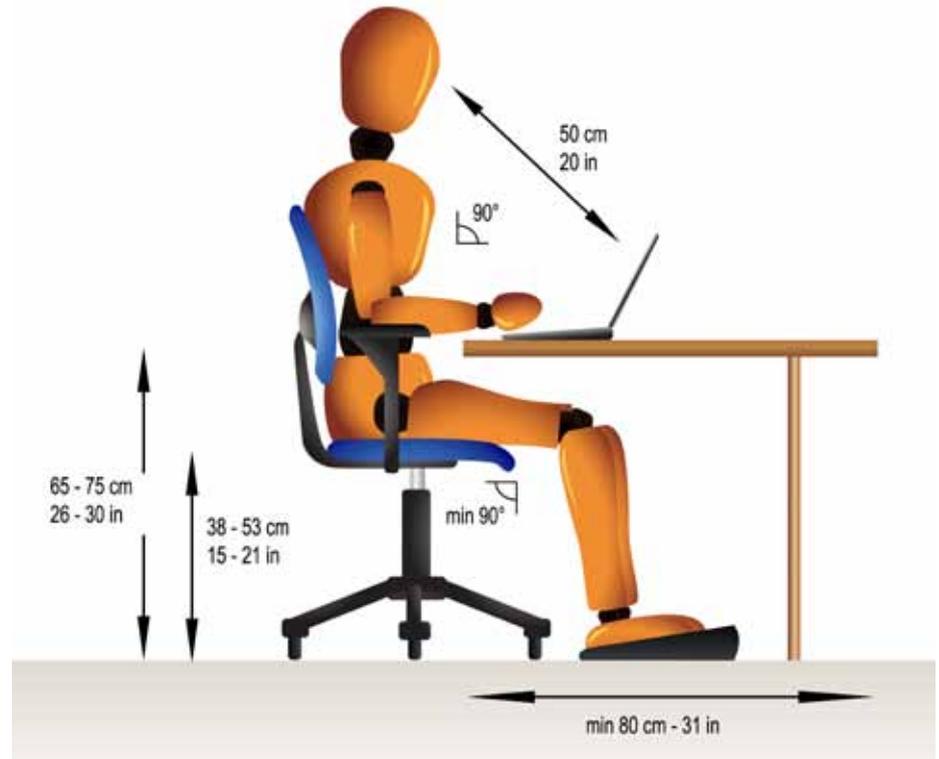
4 Warm And Cosy

Make sure you are not too cold. Stiffness can lead to muscle spasm, which will exacerbate back pain. Try simple massage techniques to help you relax and enjoy the ride.

5 Hydrate

Dehydration leads to tight muscles, which can lead to pain, so avoid caffeine and alcohol and drink plenty of water.

Are You Sitting Comfortably?



Don't Be A Fashion Victim

Large handbags, tight clothes and high heels are just some of the style statements that can cause back problems, warns Dr Richard Brassard of the American Chiropractic Association. Creating poor posture and misalignment of the spine, today's hot new look can lead to tomorrow's burning back pain.

Well Heeled

Fashion can be painful – high heels put the spine out of natural alignment, causing bad posture and leading to a sore back. Similarly, flat shoes can do the same – the safest heel height is 2.5cm.



PREVENT BACK PAIN: EXERCISE AND STRETCH

Strong muscles make for a healthy back. To keep in optimum shape is neither time-consuming nor painful, and all it takes is just a few easy exercises a day.

A strong, muscular make-up will protect your spine. Dr Low says you should imagine the muscles as the concrete, which supports the steel girders of a building. If the concrete isn't firmly set, the girders will become unstable.

Muscles have the power to move bone, so it's important that they are being worked in the right direction. Exercise is great for maintaining back strength, but too much can also be harmful.

Running on the road is not as back-friendly as running on a treadmill at the gym. Why? Because of water's buoyancy, swimming is a great exercise that causes very little stress on the back. Do note, though, that the back-bending breaststroke adds a little more strain to the back than the front crawl, in which the spine remains straight.

Many people will be under the illusion that if they have rock-hard abdominals, their backs will be in good shape. But it's not just the core that needs to be strong. You might have a six-pack, but if your posture is off, you are likely to suffer the same back pain as someone who prefers to spend life on the couch.

TIP *Thinking of swimming? Doing the front crawl is kinder on your back than the breaststroke.*



Did You Know?

If you have six-pack abs but bad posture, you could still develop back pain.



Dr Lynn Yeo, who runs Space and Light Studios at Verita Wellness Centre in Singapore, specialises in yoga therapeutics. “So many people suffer from back pain,” she observes. “What’s surprising is that it’s not usually the people who are couch potatoes; it’s those who are fit and active.”

Dr Yeo has been teaching yoga for years and has seen yoga therapeutics used to great effect. She says that the most important word to remember is ‘posture.’ “Whether sitting, running or watching a movie, how you align yourself helps to keep the back pain-free,” she advises. “The key is to change our posture awareness. Prevention is easy and straightforward – you just have to do it. The back takes a pounding every day. The discs are the shock absorbers, which stop the bones

rubbing, but as you get older, they get drier. Once the spinal curve is lost, the space between becomes narrowed and discs can bulge like a squashed balloon and sometimes rupture – but unless you change the alignment, surgery will only be a temporary fix.”

Yoga can help prevent back pain as well as alleviate it. “You are never too old to heal,” insists Dr Yeo. “We are all living, breathing tissue; as long as we are living, we can create an environment where we can heal.”

Like most things in life, starting young is an advantage, but yoga is a form of exercise you are never too old to learn. But Dr Yeo stresses that for it to be effective – like any other form of exercise – you have to do it properly, keeping proper alignment to maintain the natural curve of the spine.



Running Back

- 1 Road running may be fun, but your back won’t thank you for it – it’s preferable to run on a treadmill or on soft terrain, which minimises impact.
- 2 Put your best foot forward and don’t wear the same pair of trainers for years. Once you’ve clocked 600km, they need to be consigned to the bin.
- 3 Stretch, stretch, stretch. Before you start and when you finish. Tight muscles in any part of the body can lead to back pain if not stretched out sufficiently.
- 4 Look at how you run: a tucked bottom and over-tight abs are the quickest way to a painful spine
- 5 Get professional advice on your running gait. From selecting the right trainers to making small adjustments to your running style, these all help to ensure pain-free exercise.



YOU'RE NEVER TOO YOUNG TO LEARN



Healthy back habits start as soon as your baby is in the womb—for the mums at least.

Pregnant women: Pregnancy is one of the most common causes of back pain, which isn't that surprising given that mums-to-be are carrying more weight than at any other time in their lives. Pregnancy creates changes in posture, and there's a larger pressure on the spine from the weight of the baby and the amniotic fluid – conditions that increase the chances of getting a slipped disc.

As such, pregnant women are often advised to lie down and rest as that alleviates spinal pressure. It's at this stage in life that women should be more mindful than ever about the way they lift and carry.

Babies: It's never too early to start good back health practices. Once your baby is born, regular exercise can become a family activity and everyone can benefit. Swimming, walking and yoga are all excellent for maintaining back health. These exercise sessions can easily double up as family bonding time.

Older kids: Many youngsters today spend much of their time attached to technology, whether watching television, working on a computer, or playing games on a tablet. Physicians are seeing increased incidences of back pain in children because of this over use of technology, so regular exercise is a must. Fun activities such as ballet and football will give children the exercise they need – without making it a chore.

Keep an eye on your offspring's posture when playing games or watching TV. Ensure they do not get engrossed in these activities for hours without regular breaks and time out to get up and stretch and walk around. In fact, some studies have shown that teens who spent the most time in front of some sort of screen have the greatest increase in body fat over time.

TIP

Ensure your kid takes regular breaks while doing work on the computer to relax the eyes and stretch the body. The rule of thumb is 1-2 minutes of stretching for every 20-30 minutes of computer time, and 5-10 minutes for every hour.

With so much pressure to be book smart, the load our children carry today is not just cerebral. Many are carrying bags that an adult would struggle to lift. Parents and caregivers can help by making sure that youngsters carry their schoolwork in a backpack in preference to a bag so that the load is evenly distributed. For a healthy back, neither children nor adults should carry more than 15% of their body weight in a backpack. Check out our handy safe backpack weight calculator to make sure that neither you nor your children are overloaded.



Three easy exercises you can do at school or at work

1. Lower back stretch

Either sitting at your desk or standing, place your hands palms down on your lower back with your fingers pointing down. Lean back with your breastbone pointing towards the ceiling, making sure to keep the elbows pointing straight back. Hold for 10 seconds then relax. Repeat twice.

2. Shoulder blade squeeze

Sit on a stool or chair without arms. While maintaining a good posture, pull your shoulder blades together and hold for five seconds and then relax. Repeat three to five times throughout the day.

3. Lower back rotation

Stay seated on your stool or chair without arms. Cross your right leg over your left leg. Brace your left elbow against the right knee, twist and stretch to the side. Hold for 10 seconds then do the same on the other side. Repeat three to five times throughout the day.

Back Pain: Fact And Fiction

MYTH: Bed rest is the best thing for back pain

Lying down makes muscles tighten and can actually make the pain worse

FACT: Acupuncture may ease the hurt

Studies have shown that acupuncture is a worthwhile treatment

MYTH: Exercise is bad for backache

Regular exercise prevents back pain. For those with back problems, doctors often recommend a gentle exercise regime to help prevent future occurrences

FACT: Being overweight increases the risk of back injury

If you are overweight and sit at a desk all week, and then try and make amends by exercising like a demon at the weekend, you will have a very unhappy spine – a better alternative would be to spread your exercise sessions over the week.

ARE YOU SLEEPING COMFORTABLY?



Considering an average person spends 26 years of his or her life sleeping, making sure you are comfortable during that activity is paramount to good health, and helps to ensure that you don't suffer from back pain. It's important to find the optimal sleeping position for a well-rested spine.

Before retiring for the night, it's best to be relaxed. TV in the bedroom and working in bed are not conducive to good sleep. Keep the noise down and the room cool. Most importantly, take the time to choose a comfortable bed. While some believe that a firm orthopaedic mattress is best for banishing back pain, Dr Low says, "The best mattress is one that envelops and contours the body. We change positions around 12 times a night during our sleep and, for most people, the foetal position is the most natural way to sleep."

If you favour this position, Dr Low recommends placing a pillow between the knees for optimum comfort. The foetal position is the best way for pregnant women to sleep as it ensures back stability, which is further enhanced by the addition of a pillow to support the baby bump.

For those who can sleep all night without fidgeting, the optimal sleeping position is lying flat on the back with a pillow under knees to maintain the spine's natural curve. Sleeping on your front pulls on the spine, which is

conducive to neither a good night's sleep nor the relief of back pain.

But Dr Low emphasises that the pillow you choose is as important as your mattress. Whether you prefer to sleep on your side, front or back, there are different shaped pillows to provide the right support. Whichever type of pillow you prefer, it should always contour around the neck to provide complete support.

TIP

If you prefer to sleep on your

Side: place a pillow between the knees

Back: place a pillow under the knees

TIP

Your mattress and pillow should be able to mould itself to the contours of your neck and body.



Rise And Shine

The older you get, the harder it becomes to spring out of bed in the morning.

Never sit straight up; instead, roll your knees to the side and push up with your arms, then place your feet on the floor and stand.

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