



The back care essentials

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THE BACK CARE ESSENTIALS

Most low back pain is primarily caused by the way we move and sit. There's a 'spine-faulty' way to do everything during the day, right from the moment we get out of bed, and thankfully there's also a healthy alternative.

The spine has 24 segments, and you might think that when you bend or twist all 24 perform an equal amount of the movement, but it isn't so. Stress likes to accumulate at specific points, typically in the spine's lower joints, and with enough unhealthy movement and sitting we end up with a hinge point where all the damage is occurring.

The advice that follows is about getting rid of that hinge point by attention to the way we do things. It will take months for the spine to become stable again as the body replaces the weak, stressed tissue with new tougher fibres, but the improvements in pain are much faster, occurring within weeks.

So think of it this way: every time you move or do things in the correct way, it's like putting a £1 in the bank, and every time you do it wrong you're taking £1 out. You want to build the account as much as you can in order to get back to being pain free and doing all the activities you wish to.



FROM THE MOMENT YOU WAKE UP...

As we sleep the discs of the spine suck up fluid through tiny holes in the vertebrae, so they are most pressurised first thing. The first hour of the day is the riskiest for the spine, so it's essential to get your movements right at that time.

After an hour the pressure decreases to nearly normal. The worst thing you can do when you wake is do a sit-up, buckle the back on standing up and then continue to bend it as you get dressed, etc. Worse still is to sit in a low seat with the spine flexed to have breakfast.

A far better approach is to brace the abdomen a little, turn your hip and shoulder as one to go on your side, push to sitting, then stand by using the hips and knees with no spinal movement.

Ideally leave getting dressed, and go and have breakfast standing at a breakfast bar or perching on the edge of a high stool.

When it is done this way, the spine doesn't bend or twist, it just keeps the little hollow (called a 'lordosis') it should have.



PICKING UP YOUR SOCKS (OR ANYTHING SMALL)

Use a golfer's lift. If a golfer put down and picked up the ball plus tee with a bent back every time, that would be at least 72 spinal bends each round of golf!

Raise the back leg to both help keep the spine in neutral and to use the weight of the leg as a lever. Balancing with one hand against a wall or surface is fine, but as your balance improves the movement gets easier allowing you to pick up heavier objects (e.g. luggage) with this technique.

PUTTING ON YOUR SOCKS

If your back hurt on forward bending, this technique will help.

To make it easier lean your hips against the wall and put your heel on the opposite thigh to put the sock on. That cuts down the spine-buckling.



FORWARD BEND

Avoid any spinal movement at all and do a 'hip-hinge.'

The hip-hinge should feel like you're gliding your bottom backwards in order to lean forwards so that you keep the little hollow at the base of your back. It's fine to lean one hand on a surface (e.g. the sink when cleaning your teeth) for a bit of support.



TYING YOUR LACES

With one foot raised, don't bend your back to reach the laces, just squat through the back leg, and the spine gets to stay a lot straighter.



LIFTING HEAVIER ITEMS

If lifting is part of what you do, it's good to learn to squat properly!

To achieve this, place the feet at least as wide as the shoulders. Keeping a very straight back, squat moving the pelvis backwards and keeping the heels down. Once you've got the squat pattern right, use it to lift, keeping your spine in neutral alignment and your abdomen 'braced'.



PERFORMING AWKWARD LIFTS

In the example here a combination of a lunge, hip hinge and squat allows you to move the awkward object without losing neutral spinal alignment. It may seem complex at first, but the more we practice, the more healthy techniques are automatically adopted.

Key things to remember:

Hinge from the hips forward to reach the object and bring it back to your middle. Lunge upwards driving from your front leg. Keep your spine neutral and your abdominal braced.

RULES TO LIFT BY

- Avoid bending from your waist only; bend at the knees and hips
- Avoid lifting heavy objects higher than your waist
- Always turn and face the object
- Avoid carrying unbalanced loads
- Hold heavy objects close to your body
- Avoid sudden movements; move more deliberately, smoothly and gracefully
- Never carry or move anything which you cannot handle with ease



HOW TO SIT

Sit straight with the natural curve of your back.

Use 4 point-hold whenever possible:

- pelvis tilted to upright (not backwardly rotated)
- shoulders back and down
- head back over the shoulders, chin tucked

Try to keep your knees higher than your hips and don't slouch.

GETTING IN AND OUT OF A CHAIR

Prolonged sitting is not generally good for the back anyway. The final insult happens in the way many people go to stand up; with a forward lunge of the head and shoulders causing a further bend to the lower spine.

Instead, go from sitting to standing through the hips and knees so the low back does not bend at all. To achieve this perch towards the edge of the seat, put one foot forward and one back and drive up through the legs pushing the chest towards the ceiling. Use the arm rests to help if needed.

To sit down safely, reverse this.



BRACING THE ABDOMEN

Every time you need to load your back, either with a heavy task or a movement that feels risky to your spine, brace the abdomen to stabilise the low back.

Practice this first standing. 'Grip' the floor with your feet in a shoulder-width, stable stance and make your torso feel solid by 'locking the rib-cage to the pelvis'.

The muscles in the front and side of the abdomen should tense, as well as the low back muscles. You can feel that back muscle contraction with your hands.

WALKING...

When you walk, lift your chest, bring your head back with your chin slightly tucked and swing your arms, like a relaxed march. This reduces tension in the lower back muscles which would otherwise add compression the lower spine.

Walking is actually therapeutic for many causes of back pain when it is practised in this way. Walking slowly, with the head forward and whilst carrying items (as in shopping) is more likely to be provocative, because it adds a lot of compressive loading to the low back.