

# Easing the Ache: Prevent Back Pain Before It Flares Up

**Stop putting up with chronic back pain. Get tips to ease the ache before it even begins.**

By Mindy Pen, Contributing Writer

Many times it's difficult for doctors to pinpoint the cause of ongoing back pain. But this doesn't necessarily mean you have to be in agony all the time. There are steps you can take to minimize flare-ups and help keep the pain at bay.

**Work it out.** Staying active is an important part of managing chronic back pain. It helps build stronger muscles, including the ones that support your back. It can also help with flexibility and ease muscular stiffness.

Make your workout plan a well-rounded one by including:

- Stretching exercises to maintain your range of motion
- Strengthening exercises, such as lifting light weights, to build strong supporting muscles
  - Aerobic exercises, such as swimming or walking, for overall good health (generally, you should avoid high-impact activities, such as skiing or jogging)

Talk to your doctor before you increase your activity level. Your doctor or a physical therapist can help design a program that won't aggravate your symptoms.

**Dump the smokes.** Nicotine is bad news for your back. It prevents blood from flowing freely to the cushioning disks of the spine, which increases the risk of disk degeneration. It also affects how well our body can use calcium, which can lead to osteoporosis and painful spinal fractures. If you smoke, talk to your doctor about ways to help you quit.

**Count down the pounds.** Extra weight, especially in the midsection, causes strain on your back. To avoid this, it's best to stay within 10 pounds of your ideal weight.

**Explore some alternatives.** Massage, chiropractic, acupuncture and other therapies may relieve pain for some people. Talk to your doctor about alternatives that might be useful for your situation.

**Practice good back habits.** Pay attention to your posture. Stand up straight and avoid slouching. If you sleep on your back, put a pillow or two under your knees to take some of the pressure off your back. If you sleep on your side, placing a pillow between your knees will do the trick.



**Manage pain.** Hot and cold compresses or a warm bath or shower can relax muscles and may reduce some back pain. Over-the-counter pain relievers, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen, are also often helpful. Check with your doctor first to see what is right for you. Your doctor may prescribe other medicines as well, for long- or short-term use.

In some situations, these options may not give you enough relief. If that happens, your doctor may suggest other treatments, such as physical therapy, injections or if conservative treatments aren't enough, surgery.

**SOURCES:**

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. Low back pain fact sheet. Accessed: 05/31/2012

North American Spine Society. Lifestyle choice. Accessed: 05/31/2012

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases. What is back pain? Accessed: 05/31/2012

Arthritis Foundation. Tips for a healthy back. Accessed: 05/29/2012

Copyright © 2012 myOptumHealth.