



HOW TO

Avoid Back Pain

The Physio Explains

Eight out of ten of us suffer occasional back pain according to the charity BackCare. If the pain is persistent, getting worse or you have suffered trauma please see a GP or Chartered Physiotherapist. Otherwise here are a few ideas to help you avoid becoming a statistic.

Chartered Physiotherapist Martine Cooper explains:

“A lot of back problems are a result of poor posture awareness and a sedentary lifestyle,” although problems may appear to strike out of the blue, they are usually the result of years of bad habits.

“Good posture can be identified by the back having a natural S-shape. Basically chest out, chin in, open chest, shoulders back and down. Bad posture of a C-shaped spine – stooped, rounded shoulders, forward head position – may well result in back problem,” she explains. Add on the insult of a society that is now governed by technology - we spend far too long sitting and staring at screens.

1 Strengthen your Core

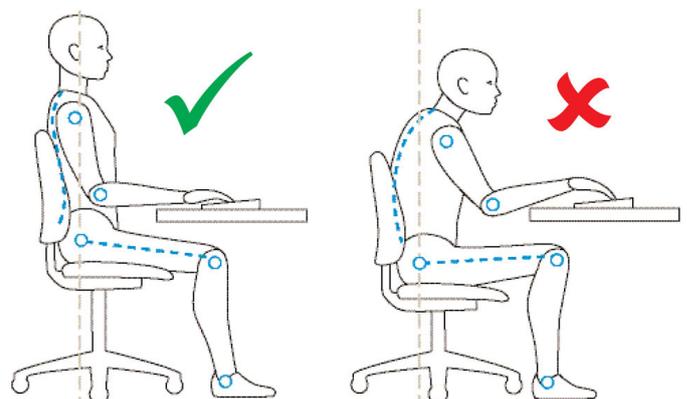
“The core muscles deep within your abdomen are like a natural corset supporting and stabilising your back” If these muscles are weak, your back is vulnerable. “You can actually see the weakness if your midriff sticks out or if your stomach hangs over your belt.”

- Sign up for a class. Classes such as Pilates are available in many gyms and health centres and concentrate on strengthening the core muscles improving posture and flexibility. It may be advisable to get some one on one instruction from a physiotherapist trained in Clinical Pilates or Pilates instructor on the basics before you do a class. Sometimes, ‘less is more’ so make sure you start at a beginners level!

2 Perfect your Posture

“Slouching or rounding your shoulders as you sit is a prime cause of back pain” . . . “The stooped posture causes your head and shoulders to drop forward. Over time this weakens the muscles in the back and imposes strain on the lower back and neck”

- Walk tall - imagine you have a thread pulling you up from the centre of your head and consciously relax your shoulders, keep your chest open.
- Remind yourself to keep your shoulders relaxed by mentally saying ‘Shoulders back and down’ when you are sitting in the car or standing in a queue.
- When sitting make sure your thighs and knees are level or below your hips. Your lower back should be well supported by the chair back. If it isn't, put a small firm cushion at the base of your spine. Your feet should be flat on the floor, your legs uncrossed.



3 Watch your weight

Being overweight or obese is one of the factors that can add to the burden of back pain. Subsequently, people who are overweight and experience back pain may want to lose weight to manage their back pain better - and this is not the only health advantage of losing weight.

4 Stay fit and active

Experts now believe that inactivity is the number one cause of back pain. Taking balanced exercise - including aerobic, stretching and strength-training exercise - are some of the best ways to protect your back.

If you are not used to exercising, gradually build more activity into your life. Here are a few ideas:

- Aim to be more active, generally by getting off the bus a stop earlier, taking the stairs instead of the lift and leaving the car at home whenever possible.
- Walking is one of the best kinds of activity for your back but don't just stroll on a level surface; walk fast and include some hills, inclines and steps into your circuit. If your joints are up to it you may want to try jogging or running too.
- Stretching is especially important, as we lose flexibility as we get older. *"Tight hamstrings, which you get from too much sitting, can pull on the back, so stretching your lower limbs really helps"*
- If you are into DIY or gardening, pace yourself. Prolonged bending can put a strain on your back and lead to problems, so don't overdo it and vary the tasks.

5 Don't over exercise

Repetitive high impact exercise such as running, step classes can sometimes aggravate low back pain. As can 'over doing it' in a gym environment with weights and mat exercises with out proper instruction. If you are suffering from persistent low back pain, don't just keep going - seek medical advice from your GP or Physiotherapist.

6 Check your Footwear

● High heels can throw your body weight forwards which sometimes can be a factor with low back pain. It may be worth resting from wearing heels to see if your back settles.

● Flat feet can also lead to back pain, particularly if doing a lot of high impact exercise such as running. It is important to buy a running shoe that suits your foot shape. A good running shop should help you with this. Sometimes wearing a shoe insert (orthotic) can help if you are flat footed. These can be purchased from large pharmacies or you may benefit from a Podiatrist's opinion if requiring a custom orthotic to be made.

7 Lift Well

If you have weak back muscles, lifting heavy objects can put a strain on your spine. We all of us lose some muscle tone as we get older, so it's especially important to lift properly.

- Try to avoid lifting heavy objects at all if you can.
- If you do have to pick up something heavy, pull in your lower tummy muscles and bend your legs so that the large muscles in your thighs and bottom take strain, rather than your back. Hold the object close to your body.
- The same applies if you have a small child; bend your knees and don't be tempted to hold the child astride one hip as this puts a strain on your back.

8 Sleep tight

Chronic back pain is often the result of sore, tense muscles. A good night's sleep is vital to relax the muscles and build up your energy to enable you to cope with pain. An old saggy mattress can do your back more harm than good, which is why it's vital to choose one that supports your spine properly. If you wake with a backache in the morning it could be a sign that your mattress is not right for you.

- To check whether your mattress gives adequate support, lie on your back and slide your hand under the small of your back. If there is a large gap, your mattress is too hard. If it is hard to squeeze your hand in it is too soft.
- Your pillow is important too. You may be better off with one rather than two pillows which can place a strain on your neck. Shop around and try a few out to find the one most comfortable for you.

Article by [Martine Cooper](#), Chartered Physiotherapist at London City Physiotherapy.