

# Your guide to a healthy back

**Quick and easy tips to keep your back and neck healthy.**



# Taking care of neck or back pain

## Take it easy

If you think you've hurt your back, ease up on the pressure you're putting on your spine. Studies on back pain show that a few days of restricting activity and taking appropriate over-the-counter medications is all that many people really need to allow the strained muscles to relax and unbind.

## Ice vs. heat

Ice can alleviate local pain that comes from muscle and ligament strain. Ice slows swelling and inflammation and acts as a local anesthetic. Using heat increases blood flow to the deep tissues and relaxes the muscle spasms. Use ice for pain and use heat for tightness or to relax muscle spasms.

## Over-the-counter medications

Inflammation is the body's protective response to irritation or injury and is characterized by redness, warmth, swelling and pain. To aid in healing and relieve pain, over-the-counter non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, naproxen sodium, aspirin or ketoprofen, are often recommended. Prolonged use of NSAIDs can lead to gastrointestinal problems, so it is wise to check with your healthcare provider before using NSAIDs or any medication. In some cases, acetaminophen may be recommended. While not an anti-inflammatory drug, acetaminophen can be effective in relieving pain without the risk of gastrointestinal problems associated with prolonged use of NSAIDs.

## Massage

If you have a willing companion, gentle massage may provide some relief by stretching tight muscles and ligaments.

## Don't stop moving

Studies maintain that limited movement of muscles and joints is more effective for treating simple back pain than passive methods such as rest and drugs. Restricting your activity is important, but as the pain eases, you should move your muscles and joints past the point of the initial restriction. Let pain be your guide as you move throughout your day. Simple exercises can help this process, but it is important to consult your healthcare provider or a back specialist for the exercise program that is right for you.

## Adjust your daily routine

When you are in pain, you need to make adjustments to the way you approach daily activities. If sitting is painful, sit as little as possible and only for a short period of time. If you have to use a computer, take frequent short breaks. Use a desktop instead of a laptop. Avoid low furniture and use a rolled-up towel to support your lower back. Choose a firm chair with a straight back. Avoid lifting or carrying anything heavy or awkward. Think of ways you can limit the stress on your back like not bending over to wash your face, brush your teeth, or load or unload the dishwasher or washing machine.

## When back pain is serious

Although most back pain will resolve itself within a week or month, you may require additional help for difficult or chronic pain.

## You should see a doctor without delay if you have any of these warning symptoms:

- Recent major trauma, including automobile accidents, falls or severe sports injuries
- Pain radiating down a leg
- Pain that is constant and doesn't vary with motion
- Pain in the upper back or chest
- Pain that increases at night or when lying down
- Unexplained fever of 101 degrees or more
- Unexplained weight loss of 10 pounds or more
- A previous diagnosis of cancer or another major illness

If your pain doesn't change or gets worse in 2 to 3 weeks, please contact your doctor. In addition, a physical therapy program, a pain program or other specialized treatment may be recommended.

# Exercises for a healthy back

Good posture, body mechanics and exercise are essential to maintaining a healthy back. No matter what activity you are doing, you need to make sure your back can handle the wear and tear you have in mind. In particular, be careful when you lift. Keep heavy objects close to your body, and be sure to bend your knees and lift with your legs, not your back.

For general conditioning, you need to focus on two basic areas: abdominal strengthening and a good stretching regimen to warm up before an activity.

## The warm up

The warm up is very important. Before beginning your stretches, warm up with light activities, such as a light jog, for approximately five minutes. This increases circulation and allows your muscles to warm up before stretching.

## Stretching

To help prevent back injury and back pain involved with sports, the following exercises will help keep your back strong. When doing these exercises, take care to move only until you feel a light stretch (not to the point of pain), stretch slowly and do not bounce.

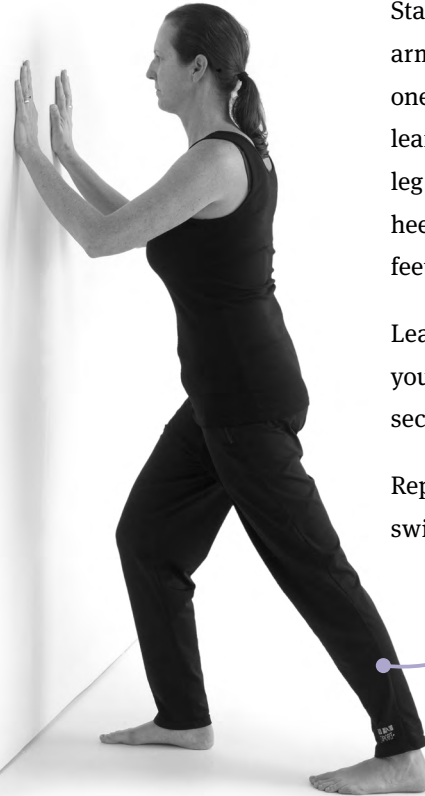
*Please note that not everyone can do every exercise. Use discretion and consult your physician before starting this or any exercise program.*

## Gastroc stretch

Stand facing a wall with your arms stretched forward. Move one foot toward the wall and lean forward, keeping the back leg straight as shown. Your heels should be on the floor and feet straight ahead.

Lean until you feel a stretch in your calf, and hold for 30 to 40 seconds.

Repeat 3 to 4 times and then switch legs.



**Feel the stretch here**



## Seated hamstring stretch

Sit on a firm surface with one leg out in front of you.

Slowly lean forward, sliding your hands down your leg, over the knee, and across your shin until you feel a stretch in the back of your thigh.

Hold for 30 to 40 seconds. Repeat 3 to 4 times for each leg.

*Caution! Don't try to bend your lower back. Lean forward with your chest.*

**Feel the stretch here**



### Postural alignment

Using a wall for reference, stand upright, hold your head up straight with your chin in. Do not tilt your head in any direction. Stretch your spine so that the top of your head moves toward the ceiling. Tuck your stomach in, and be sure not to tilt your pelvis forward. Imagine drawing your belly button back toward your spine.

Hold for 10 seconds and repeat 3 times.

### Quadriceps stretch

Rest one hand on a stable object for balance/support. Bend one leg, bringing your foot up onto a chair behind you. Flatten your low back, tilting your pelvis backward.



Hold for 30 to 40 seconds. Repeat 3 to 4 times for each leg.

Feel the stretch here

### Seated rowing

Using your Theraband, attach it to a secure object like a door knob and grasp the band in both hands. Sit in a chair with your back unsupported, maintaining your postural alignment.

Keep your elbows bent and near your sides. Squeeze your shoulder blades together, pulling your arms toward your chest. Slowly return to start and repeat.

Perform 1 to 2 sets of 10 repetitions every other day. Rest one minute between sets.



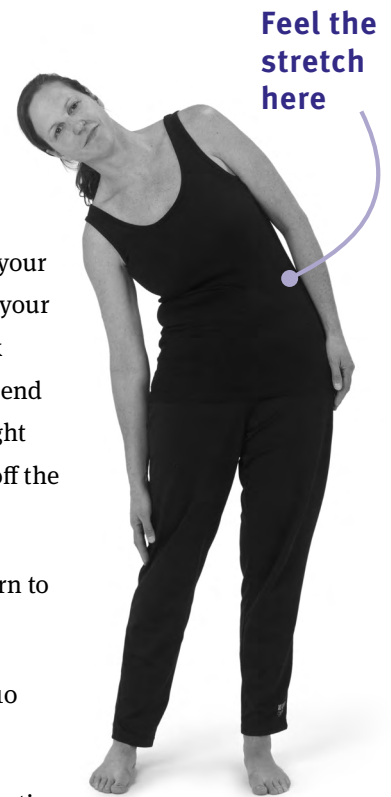
### Side bend stretch

Lean against a wall with your arms by your sides. Keep your head, shoulders and back against the wall, slowly bend your upper back to the right without lifting your foot off the ground.

Hold for 10 seconds. Return to standing position.

Bend to the left. Hold for 10 seconds.

Repeat 3 to 4 times, alternating right to left.



Feel the stretch here

# Doing the activities you love

The best way to prevent back pain is to keep the rest of your body healthy. Exercise is the key. Swimming, walking and biking are particularly worthwhile for those who have had back pain in the past. A good diet will also help prevent obesity.

## Golf

The golf swing is one of the most difficult movements in all of sports. This swing places biomechanical forces seven times your body weight on the lumbar spine. It is no wonder that nearly 80 percent of all golfers experience some type of spine injury in their lifetime. Problems often develop due to repeated bending or poor flexibility in the back, legs and arms. Improper golf swing technique is another common cause of back pain or injury. Injury and pain in these areas could be prevented by improved flexibility and strength conditioning.

## Tennis

Tennis can be a stressful exercise for your upper and lower back. The broad swings of racket sports, coupled with the constant pounding of your feet on hard surfaces, guarantee an achy back unless you've properly warmed up and conditioned yourself. Back problems often develop because of tightness in the neck, shoulders, back and legs.



# 10 HELPFUL HINTS FOR A HEALTHY BACK

**Exercising.** Something as simple as a daily walk can make a huge difference. Exercise helps keep the abdominal muscles supporting your back strong and flexible.

**Lifting.** Do the work with your legs, not with your back. Bend at the knees, not at the waist, and lift straight up with the weight as close to your body as possible.

**Standing.** Keeping one foot forward of the other, with knees slightly bent, takes the pressure off the low back.

**Sitting.** Sitting with your knees slightly higher than your hips provides good low back support.

**Carrying.** Two small objects (one in either hand) may be easier to handle than one large one. If you must carry one large object, keep it close to your body.

**Sleeping.** Sleep on your back or side not your stomach. Improper sleeping positions can exacerbate neck and back pain. If you sleep on your back, relieve some pressure by putting a couple of pillows under your knees. When you lie on your side, put a pillow between your knees.

**Controlling your weight.** A large waist and a lack of exercise can weaken your muscles, causing stiffness and low-back pain. Keep within 10 pounds of your ideal weight for a healthier back.

**Smoking.** Quit smoking. Smoking restricts the blood flow to the disks that cushion vertebrae, speeding wear and tear.

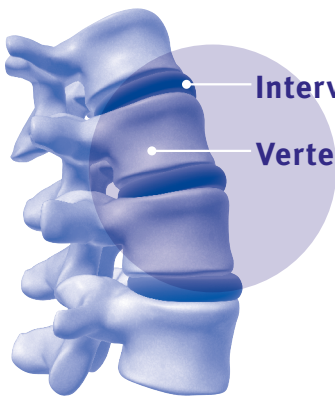
**Cradling.** Avoid cradling the phone between your neck and shoulder.

**Overloading.** Don't overload your backpack or purse. Remember to carry it over both shoulders to balance the load (if possible).

# Understanding your back

## The most common causes of back pain:

- Abnormal spine alignment
- Arthritis
- Bulging discs
- Muscle spasms and strains
- Pinched nerves
- Poor posture
- Sciatica
- Tight muscles



**Intervertebral disc**

**Vertebrae**

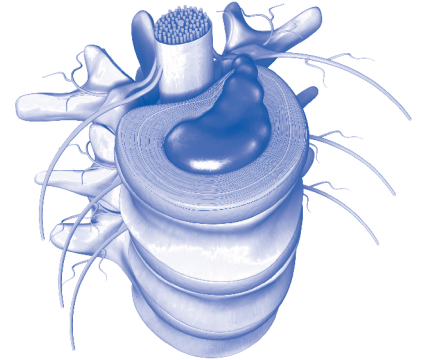
Like every part of the human body, the back is complex. Your “backbone” is not a bone at all, but a column of 24 individual bones called vertebrae.

These vertebrae are separated by intervertebral discs, which act as shock absorbers. Each disc has a soft core surrounded by a capsule of fibrous tissue.

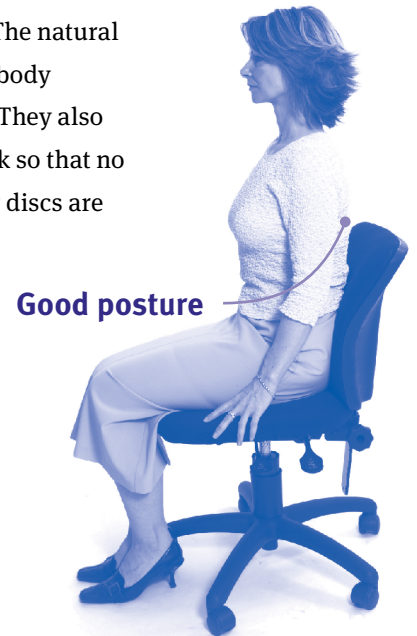
Nerve roots run out from the spinal cord, passing between the vertebral bodies. These spinal nerves transmit the commands

responsible for muscle movement, and they carry back the signals of sensation.

A group of strong ligaments holds the vertebrae together. Muscles that run along the sides of the spinal column provide extra support.



Posture is a key component to a healthy spine. The natural curves of your spine keep your body balanced and provide support. They also distribute the force on your back so that no structure muscles, ligaments or discs are stressed.



Salem Health Spine Center helps patients get the right spine care quickly. Once referred by your primary care physician, the Salem Health Spine Center will have your full medical history and films evaluated by a spine specialist as soon as possible. Our nurse navigator will then coordinate your care to get your treatment started quickly and provide updates to your primary care physician.

For more information, please call the Salem Health Spine Center: **503-814-2225** or contact your primary care physician.

Your can also visit our website: [salemhealth.org/spine](http://salemhealth.org/spine)

