

## Understanding Back Pain

OUCH! I think we all are familiar with this common ailment. Most people have to grab that low back now and then and know the feeling of having pain between the shoulder blades. Sadly enough, it only gets worse as we age. One of the main factors is a gradual loss of muscle mass caused by aging and lack of exercise. Strength exercises are the best way, well, actually the only way, to counteract the loss of muscle mass that goes with aging and prevent back pain. It is never too late to begin to exercise and improve your strength and comfort level.

Back pain, due to muscle pain, actually goes down after the age of 65 as people retire and stop suffering overuse injuries. However, the incidence of back pain caused by conditions such as osteoarthritis deteriorated discs, and spinal stenosis increases, due to damage to the spinal structure from years of decreasing muscle strength and poor posture.

The most important thing a person can do to avoid, alleviate and prevent back pain is EXERCISE! Muscle strengthening exercise also improves balance, which helps prevent falls, and increases bone mass, an added bonus. Stretching exercises maintain mobility and prevent muscle strain injuries that cause back pain. Here is a link to [Back Exercises](#). If you choose a good set of exercises, start gently, build up intensity and do it regularly you will feel the improvement rapidly.

Lack of Sleep is a major issue of back pain. Fatigued back muscles strain and spasm easier and cannot support the spine properly, resulting in poor posture. When the spine is misaligned, the discs and spinal joints suffer damage from the extra pressure and begin to deteriorate. Our bodies repair themselves as we sleep so without adequate sleep the necessary healing cannot occur. Lack of sleep also imbalances brain chemistry, lowering the pain threshold so that we become more irritated by the pain and can easily become depressed.

Pain can interrupt sleep so the back pain may be the cause of your sleep difficulties. Sleeping medication and mild pain medication is good for temporary relief of pain so that a few good nights of sleep will heal a minor strain or pain. Because tolerance to medications builds up, use these medications sparingly and save them for the worst times. For chronic pain sufferers, a doctor will usually prescribe a low dose of antidepressant to raise the serotonin level in the blood. Higher serotonin levels increase the tolerance of pain and improve the quality of sleep.

Chronic back pain and depression/anxiety seem to occur together. Nobody explains why that it is, but low serotonin levels are common in both chronic pain and depression. Again, the fatigue caused by depression may weaken the muscles so they do not support the back properly, or the chronic pain may lead to feelings of helplessness and depression. If you and your doctor suspect depression is the culprit, a higher dose of antidepressant may be helpful.

Aerobic exercise also increases levels of serotonin and endorphins - natural substances released by your body that are similar to opiates - and relieves back pain and depression. If it is possible to overcome the fatigue, enough to stick to a gentle aerobic plan, for a couple of weeks, major improvement will happen.

Stress hormones cause the muscles to tighten up while also lowering pain tolerance. Tense muscles reduce blood supply to the tissues, causing lack of oxygen and an accumulation of waste products (such as lactic acid) in the muscles. This slows the healing ability, leads to fatigue and can cause or intensify pain. Muscles can spasm painfully. Neck muscles commonly spasm under stress. Yikes, its another nasty cycle! Stress causes pain and pain causes stress.

When the back muscles are tight due to stress, they are less capable of tolerating even mild abuse (lifting something slightly heavy, poor posture, a sudden twist, sitting too long, etc) and are more vulnerable to injury. Relieving stress can reduce pain that is aggravated or caused by tense muscles. Managing stress on an ongoing basis may also help prevent back pain from occurring in the first place. Muscles relax and blood pressure, heartbeat, and respiration decrease as relaxation increases.

Stress can be relieved through exercise. Aerobic exercise burns off stress hormones and increases the body's production of endorphins - naturally occurring chemicals that relieve pain and improve mood. Stretching exercises also can relieve stress and loosen tight muscles. Gentle yoga blends stretching and holding exercises with breathing techniques and mental imaging to relieve stress.

Since stress is such a common problem, there are many relaxation techniques. Some are easy to do anytime and anywhere that stress occurs from simple deep breathing exercises during a business meeting to self-hypnosis, meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided imagery that you can use during a bumpy airplane journey or waiting for a friend in the emergency room.

Massage Therapy, Reflexology and other bodywork is very beneficial for relaxing muscles, increasing circulation, and relieving stress. Regular therapy can help manage stress and back pain. Soaking in warm water relaxes muscles and has

a calming effect. Adding Epsom salt to the water will ease more pain and diffusing essential oils will soothe and calm the body and mind. Stress Management is an ongoing process - as is staying strong through exercise.

Smokers have an increased rate of back pain, especially lower back pain, possibly because the lowered oxygen levels in the blood and tissues delays healing. Smokers also experience increased degeneration of the discs. Here is another reason to quit smoking!

I cannot stress enough how important staying hydrated is to your health. Any use of your muscles, even sitting and standing, causes acidic waste products to accumulate in the muscle tissues. High levels cause muscle irritation and pain. Drinking lots of water will flush these toxins from the tissues, to the kidneys and out of the body.

Understanding the gradually progressive nature should help you realize that keeping fit through exercise and managing stress are the most important elements in the treatment and prevention of back pain. Breaking your lack of sleep/pain or pain/lack of sleep cycle is necessary to allow your body to heal. Drinking lots of water and not smoking are additional aides to staying strong and pain free.

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