

Preventing Back Injuries

Back pain is one of the most common reasons for doctor visits in the US. In fact, at least one in five Americans will experience some sort of back pain during his or her lifetime. The good news is, most back pain can be prevented by proper care. And if back pain does occur, most injuries will resolve without a doctor's care.

As with most other health issues, prevention is easier, less expensive, and less painful than treatment once injury occurs. There are several steps you can take to avoid a back problem:

- Keep your weight at a normal level. Excess pounds put excess stress on joints and muscles all over the body. The back muscles have to work much harder when carrying around a heavy belly.
- Exercise regularly. Walk, swim, ride a bike—anything that keeps you moving and doesn't put too much stress on the spine will benefit the back. Regular stretching through activities such as yoga, tai chi, and Pilates has been proven to prevent back injuries. Just be sure you have a good instructor when starting a stretching program. Strength training, in particular exercises that strength the abdominal muscles, also can help prevent back strain.
- Stand up straight. Your mother was right, good posture will not only make you look taller and thinner, it also keeps the spine in proper alignment and helps prevent muscle fatigue.
- Learn how to lift properly. When lifting anything, even something very light, keep your back straight and bend from the knees. Let your legs do most of the work. Avoid twisting your back when you lift.

What if you already have back pain?

Recurring back pain can be caused by old injuries that haven't healed properly, or can arise at any time for no apparent reason. Recent studies show a link between depression and back pain. Back pain that prevents normal activities could cause anyone to feel blue. Anyone experiencing symptoms of depression that last longer than two weeks should seek medical attention.

Luckily, most back pain just requires a few days of taking it easy and using over-the-counter pain medications such as acetaminophen or ibuprophen. Bed rest is usually not necessary, and may actually delay recovery. If back pain persists beyond 72 hours or gets worse, it's best to call your doctor.