

## Exercise Helps Keep Your Back Healthy

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Our articles have been discussing the importance of preventive medicine and educating ourselves on health lifestyle decisions. Let's see how this relates to the part of our body called the back.

Contrary to popular belief, backs do not just give out. A bad back is not inevitable, but is related to our lifestyle and habits.

Eight out of ten people, including some people who are fit, experience some type of back pain in their lives.

In Fact, back pain ranks second only to common cold as the most frequent cause of sick leave in the United States. Americans spend \$5 billion a year to heal their backs. But much of this expense and pain can be avoided. One of the reasons is that 80 percent to 85 percent of back pain comes from muscular pain.

If you are between the ages of 30 and 35 years, this article is written with you in mind, because this is the most likely age bracket for victims of back pain.

As we reach middle age, our discs, which are composed of cartilage and fluid, lose some of their inner moisture and shrink. This occurrence can explain why some of us become shorter in that stage of life.

As wear and tear occurs, vertebrae in our backs may rub together and cause pain. After about age 55, this disc breakdown ceases and the spine becomes more permanent and rigid, and actually less prone to back disorders. Arthritis can set in, but the following measures should also help avoid arthritic conditions.

Because back pain often begins in the muscles, reducing excess pounds can help you keep your back fit and at its best. Most back pain occurs in the lower curve of your back where only five vertebrae support the most weight and suffer the biggest strain from activities such as lifting, bending, and twisting.

Although pain can strike the average weight as well as the overweight person, the "potbelly" helps to throw the body's center of gravity off, pulling the spine into more of an excessive curve – this compresses the vertebrae and can cause back pain.

Good muscle tone is necessary for proper posture and to reduce excess curve in the spine. This is where exercise comes in. Exercise improves back support and also helps bones from deteriorating. If you do not have back problems, a regular, moderate exercise program for 20 minutes, three times a week, will help keep muscles toned and firm. If you suffer from back problems, walking or cross-country skiing are excellent choices.

Finally, stress can cause back problems through the effect it has on your ability to relax. If your stress level seems to be out of control, exercise can also be a great stress reliever. A back massage can also provide wonderful relief for mind and body.

If, despite all of this, you feel a back pain coming on, rest as soon as your back feels fatigued, then gently stretch the muscles. Backaches used to be treated with one week to two weeks of rest. Now it is understood that two days of bed rest is sufficient. If your back pain is persistent, or you are unsure what kind of exercise would be most helpful for maintaining your back's health, you should see your local health provider.