

Care for your Back

Back pain is very common and most of us will get it at some time. How you use your back, both at work and home, can determine whether you will have to learn to live with back pain. With the right approach, basic back pain could be avoided.

Experts now recognise that the increasingly sedentary lives that we lead contribute greatly to the back pain epidemic that is now being experienced in the western world.

An office worker can spend anything from 25 to 40 hours a week in a static position working at a computer. Travelling to and from work may involve long journeys either sitting (or more likely standing) on a train or bus with no room for movement. When we get home, it is far easier to sit and eat dinner in front of the TV, spending the rest of the evening sprawled on the sofa, than it is to go out and get some exercise.

If you want to keep your back healthy, it is important to keep it moving and to support it properly when you are not. This section will describe some of the ways you can reduce the likelihood of back pain and other related health issues.

A Bit About Your Back

The spine is made up of 33 small bones called vertebrae with discs that act as shock absorbers in between.

These bones are given a code to show where they are in the spine.

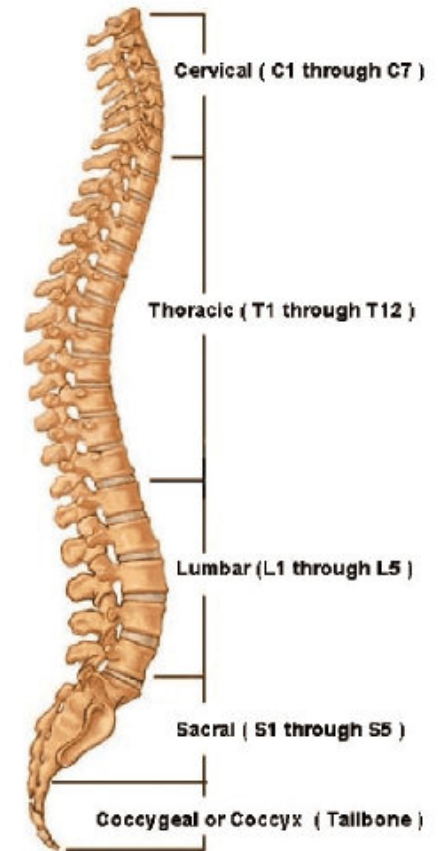
The discs are made up of a soft jelly like substance (the nucleus) which is held inside a tough, elastic and fibrous outer casing (the annulus). If the outer casing of these discs is damaged in any way and causes the nucleus to protrude, or even leak out, it causes what is commonly known as a 'slipped' disc but correctly known as a prolapsed disc. The muscles of the back support this structure and when these muscles go into spasm the most common form of back pain occurs. This often happens when you have been doing something strenuous or that involves a lot of bending like gardening, or when you have been in an awkward position for a long time and go to move. There are other more serious causes of back pain such as disc prolapse and diseases of the spine, but if your pain has subsided and there are no unusual symptoms such as numbness, pins and needles or pain down the leg, muscle spasm would usually be the culprit (if your pain lasts longer than 48 hours and is getting worse, or if any of the signs previously mentioned appear you should consult your GP immediately).

Posture

Try to maintain a good posture by not slumping in your chair, hunching up over a desk or table or walking around with your shoulders hunched up. Instead, imagine there is an invisible cord from the top of your head to the ceiling lifting you into a tall, relaxed posture rather than a short, hunched one.

Lifting and Carrying

Wherever possible, avoid lifting and carrying as these can cause back pain. If you do have to lift something bend your knees not your back. Keep your feet wide apart to help you feel stable. In this way, you are using your strong leg muscles and not straining your back. Carry the object against your body (so that its centre of gravity is close to yours). Bend at the knees to put the object down.



C – followed by a number from 1 to 7 will refer to the vertebrae in the neck.

T – 1-12 refers to the thoracic spine (from the bottom of the neck to the Lumbar region).

L – followed by 1-5 refers to the lumbar (or lowest) section of the spine.

Beneath the lumbar spine there are another 5 vertebrae fused together, forming the sacrum with the coccyx (or tail bone) underneath.



Caring for Your Back

Regularly assess the risks associated with each work task and improve procedures and equipment if necessary. Lifting and work equipment provided must be suitable for its intended use.

Plan jobs to eliminate or minimise the need for work to be performed in awkward positions.

Customise training for each work group. Include basic instructions in anatomy and focus on the risk factors associated with poor body positioning.

Draw attention to the correct methods of bending, lifting and carrying at every opportunity such as during safety meetings and "toolbox talks". Awareness posters and instructions along with graphic illustrations of manual handling techniques should be posted at important locations on board.

Stress the importance of teamwork. Work with a partner to share a load and obtain mechanical assistance for heavy and/or oversized loads when necessary.

Encourage early reporting of symptoms such as neck or back pains. Early reporting can often make the difference between a relatively short treatment and recovery period and long term permanent disability.

Promote exercise! A well-toned body can take unexpected stresses or strains better than one suffering from lack of exercise.

Exercise or Bed Rest?

Exercise is the most important way that you can:

- Ease stiffness and pain;
- Build up muscle strength and stamina;
- Improve your flexibility and general fitness.

If your back pain lasts a while, lack of movement can cause the muscles to become weak. This makes it more likely that you will strain them in future. It's important that you don't rest for too long and keep moving.

Physiotherapy Information Line (PHIL)

PAMI's unique telephone-based physiotherapy triage service Phil helps to deal with MSK symptoms quickly; therefore reducing the likelihood of conditions worsening and keeping you off work.

PHIL provides:

- **Support and advise on day 1 of the injury, limiting the impact of conditions worsening;**
- **Clinical and psycho-social triage with onward referral to physiotherapy treatment where needed;**
- **Access to hands-on therapy, functional work assessments and online exercise plans**



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