



**SOUTHEASTERN SPINE INSTITUTE**

presents

*Preventing*

*Back Pain*

**An eBook for Patients**

# *Preventing Back Pain*

Presented by the SOUTHEASTERN SPINE INSTITUTE

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## Chapter 1

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### *5 Tips to Keep Your Back Healthy*

**Y**ou already know — or should know by now — not to bend at the waist when you pick something up. Instead, bend your knees and lift with your legs, not your back. That's common sense, and it will protect your back from injury. Presented here are five lesser-known, common-sense tips to keep your back healthy.



### *1. Twist and Shout*

Twisting may cause you to shout in pain, so avoid it and save your back. If you've had back problems before, avoid twisting altogether. Twisting with your back, especially while you're bending or lifting, is a surefire way to cause injury. Reposition yourself instead. Move your feet.

### *2. Sit Up Straight*

We all spend a lot of time in a sitting position. If you maintain good posture while you sit, you are more likely to avoid hurting your back. Keep both feet on the floor and make sure your knees are roughly even with your hips. Lean back into the chair and pull your shoulders back gently. Now relax. That feels better, doesn't it?

### *3. Sleep Better for a Better Back*

Firm mattresses are better for your back. In addition, when you sleep, the goal should be to keep your spine straight. Wrap a sheet around your waist if you sleep on your side. Put a pillow under your knees if you sleep on your back. Don't sleep on your stomach, if you can avoid it.

### *4. Reach for Goals, Not Shelves*

Reaching for something that's too high can torque and twist your back, putting pressure on both sides of your spine in different directions. That even *sounds* painful. So don't reach for anything above shoulder height. Get a stool. Get someone taller. Don't hurt yourself while reaching.

### *5. Get Help When You Need It*

Occasionally, we all do something wrong — twist, lift or bend the wrong way — and we feel it immediately. If you hurt your back,

don't wait for the pain to go away on its own. Visit your doctor or a spine specialist at the Southeastern Spine Institute. It's better to be safe than sorry, and even it's nothing serious, the doctor can give you something for the pain.

## Chapter 2

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# *Everyday Stretches for a Healthy Back*

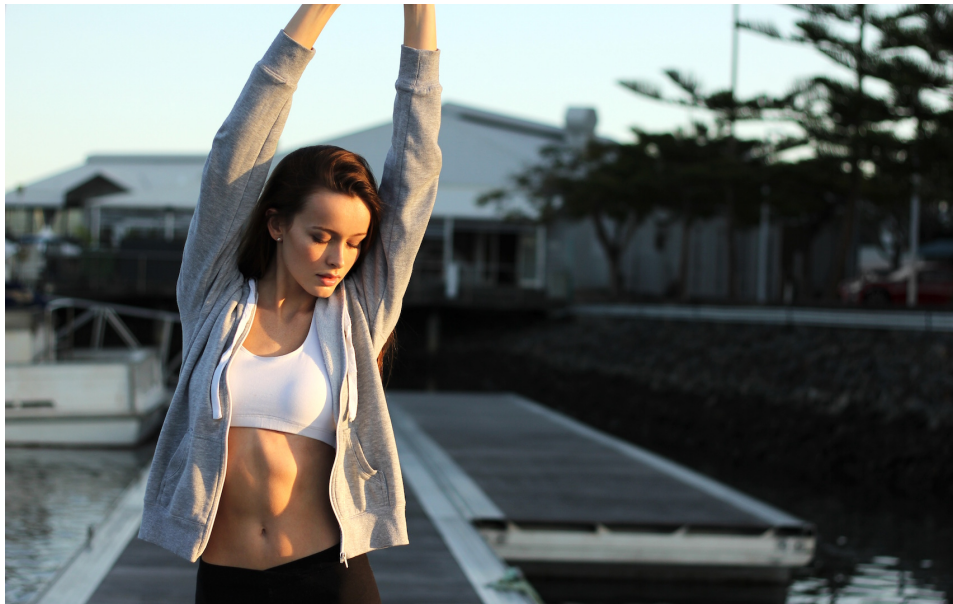
The human body wasn't designed to sit in a chair all day. Your tendons, ligaments and muscles — especially those immediately surrounding your spinal column — all need to stretch. It's the nature of your body to want to move. When your connective tissues don't get regular stretching, they tend to get grouchy. That's one of the causes of back pain.

So you hit the gym several times a week. You swim, run or cycle on weekends. Maybe you take long walks on the beach, over the bridge or just up the stairs at work. You're satisfied with the level of exercise you get and don't have a lot of health issues. When you exercise, you probably do some stretching, too.

On the other hand, perhaps you've experienced back pain in the past and try not to push it. Maybe you're just beginning to feel the effects of a sedentary lifestyle. You think a good stretch is reaching for the chips on the top shelf of the cupboard (something you should never do, by the way).

## *Stretching Helps Everyone*

No matter what your level of fitness or how healthy you are now, consider your back and all it does for you. Your back is the linchpin of all your activities. It houses the nerves that extend throughout your body. It allows you to stand and sit upright. It provides your core strength.



To maintain a healthy back, no matter what else you do, listen to the best back doctors at the Southeastern Spine Institute and get in the habit of stretching every day. If you are under a doctor's care, be sure to double-check before starting any new exercise.

Whether you start out slowly or jump right in, the following five simple stretches for your back will help keep you limber and pain-free. To ensure many years of healthy living, do them everyday:

- *Good Morning Stretches*

Once you're out of bed, bend over as far as you can. Don't bounce or bother touching your toes. Just hold the pose and count to 10. Rise slowly, and with your hands above your

head, reach for the ceiling. First try to touch the sky with your right hand. Release and then use your left hand.

- *Knee to Chest*

Before getting in the shower, lie on your back on the floor. Raise one knee and, using both hands, gently pull it toward your chest. Hold the stretch for 10 seconds. Release and do your other knee. Repeat this stretch three or four times. Finish by raising both knees and pulling them toward your chest. Hold for 10 seconds.

- *Hamstring Pull*

Before you get up off the floor, give your lower back a good stretch. Raise one leg straight up in the air and pull it toward you as far as is comfortable. Use a towel behind your thigh to gently tug. Don't bounce; just hold the stretch for 10 to 20 seconds. Repeat with your other leg.

- *Reverse Shoulder Blade Pull*

Take a few moments during the day for another stretch. While sitting straight, squeeze your shoulder blades together in the back. Hold it for five seconds and relax. Do this twice a day, and you'll notice how much more limber you feel at the end of the day.

- *Pain in the Neck*

Sitting for long periods of time can give you a stiff neck. For this stretch, sit upright and touch your chin to your chest. Hold for 20 seconds, lift your head and repeat. Raise your head and then try to touch your ear to your shoulder. Hold and then repeat on the other side. This is a great stretch to prevent a sore neck.



## Chapter 3

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# *5 Therapeutic Exercises for Your Back*

**T**herapeutic exercise helps strengthen your sore or weak back following surgery, injury, disease or age-related conditions. Try the following exercises up to three times a day for 10–30 minutes. As you gain strength, repeat them more frequently, but don't do them for longer than 30 minutes at a time.

Listen to your spine physician's advice and your physical therapist's directions. Spinal medicine, as practiced by the professionals at the Southeastern Spine Institute, is a delicate art. You don't want to overdo it because over-exercising can lead to a setback. Go easy and take it slow. Rest is vital for healing.

Exercises for your back often involve stretching other parts of your body because your back provides the skeletal foundation for all your limbs. Obtain approval from your Southeastern Spine Institute medical doctor before you begin any exercise regimen.

Try these easy-to-advanced exercises:

### *1. Easy Prone Stretches*

From a prone position, stretch your ankles forward and backward. Do this 10 times for each foot. Then slide your heel toward your buttocks. Don't strain; just let your heel slide and your knee bend until it feels tight. Repeat this 10 times on each side. If you feel up to it, bend one knee and then lift the straight leg 10 inches off the ground. Hold it there for five seconds, and then lower your leg. Repeat 10 times for each leg.



### *2. Easy Wall Exercises*

With your back against a wall and your feet about a foot in front of you, clench your abdominal muscles and slowly bend your knees 45 degrees. Hold the new position for five seconds, and then straighten up. Do this 10 times. Then face the wall with your feet still the same distance from the wall, about shoulder width apart. Keeping a hand on the wall, push up onto the balls of your feet, raising your heels off the ground. Repeat 10 times.

### *3. Intermediate Hamstring Stretches*

Lie flat on your back and bring one knee up toward your chest, grabbing it with both hands behind the knee. Hold for 20 seconds, breathing regularly. Repeat this stretch five times for each leg. Once you've loosened up, repeat the same exercise, except this time, bring your knee to a 90-degree bend and then straighten your leg as much as you can, until you feel your hamstring tighten. This

exercise should not hurt; stretch as far as you can and no farther.  
Do this stretch five times for each leg.

#### *4. Intermediate Sitting Stretch*

This stretch works great if you've got one of those large inflatable balls, but if not, use a chair or the edge of your bed. Sit with your legs at a 90-degree angle. Raise one arm straight over your head while lifting the opposite heel off the ground. Repeat with the other arm and heel. Do this 10 times, and then repeat — except this time, raise your entire foot off the ground instead of just your heel. Repeat it 10 times.

#### *5. Advanced Hip Exercise*

Don't do this stretch unless you get your medical doctor's permission. Lie down at the edge of your bed, so your knees hang over the edge. Bring both knees to your chest, holding them behind the knees. Release one leg at a time, letting it drop until you feel the muscles in your hip and thigh tighten. Repeat this stretch five times for each leg, never dropping the leg too far. Let the stretch work.

## Chapter 4

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### *The Ergonomics of Lifting*

Each day, about 2,750 Americans hurt their backs. Americans miss work more frequently from lower back pain than from any other malady except the common cold. Whether you just pulled a muscle or are experiencing herniated disc symptoms, back pain can be debilitating. It's no wonder people call in sick when they've hurt their backs; they can't move without pain.



Yet despite the ubiquity of back trauma throughout the country, most back injuries are completely preventable. Treat your spine like the treasured structure it is. Take precautions when lifting, twisting or bending. And learn the proper ergonomics of lifting.

Too many people are injured lifting too quickly or letting their backs do all the work. Since you can injure yourself from lifting the wrong way, which enlivens herniated disc symptoms, it behooves you to learn the proper way to lift things — and to put that knowledge to use every day. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that about 75 percent of all back injuries happen when lifting something. So why are people, especially those with demanding physical jobs, still not taking common-sense precautions to avoid back surgery?

### *There's More to It*

Take responsibility to learn the best techniques. Start by understanding the three ways you can harm your back when lifting or carrying objects, large and small:

- **Joint Injury:** Your spinal joints — where the muscles meet the bones in your back — are particularly susceptible to injury when you're lifting or carrying lighter objects because you may not pay as much attention to technique. Even with lighter loads, your joints can lock up and lead to debilitating pain if you move the wrong way.
- **Muscle Injury:** Muscle injuries often occur over time. Each little strain creates minor tears in the sinewy tissues in your back that give you flexibility. Too much improper demand on those back muscles will lead to a type of painful back injury that may not require back surgery, but can still cause pain and other issues.

- **Disc Injury:** A disc can rupture, bulge or even break open when you lift something the wrong way. Aggravating the disc injury by carrying the object improperly leads to lasting pain that can radiate down your legs.



### *Before You Lift...*

The first step of the proper lifting technique is to stretch your muscles. Standing with your hands on your hips, roll from your waist to your right in a large circle. Repeat in the other direction. Then take a step forward and straighten your back leg as you lean forward slightly. Feel your hamstring stretch. Repeat this stretch with the other leg.

Now shift your weight to your rear leg. Straightening your front leg, lift your toes toward the ceiling. Bend forward at your waist and feel the stretch in your calf and ankle. Again, repeat the stretch with the other leg.

## *Now You're Ready*

To avoid herniated disc symptoms, lift with your legs, not your back. That means keeping your back straight while you lift.

Approach the object and, using your legs and hips, squat down to it. Get a good grip. Keep one foot flat and the other a bit to the side, to aid your balance.

When you're ready, push with your legs into a standing position, keeping your back straight. If the object is too heavy, return to the squat and release it. Don't hurt yourself; instead, ask for help.

If you can lift it, use your legs and hips to gain a full upright position. Your arms should remain straight. You're carrying the weight of the object with your legs, not your arms. Walk to wherever you need to go and reverse the process to place the object on a surface or onto the floor. It's as dangerous (or more dangerous) putting the object down as it is picking it up. Be careful!

## *Lifting Tips*

- Size up a load before you even begin lifting.
- Check the area to ensure you have sufficient room to stoop and move around safely.
- Don't bend or twist when lifting or setting something down. Keep your hips square.
- Get as close to the object as possible when you pick it up.
- Keep your back straight but not vertical as you stoop.
- Tuck in your chin to help keep your back straight.
- Don't hold your breath when you're lifting or putting something down. Breathe.
- Keep your legs shoulder width apart to maintain your balance.

- Use your palms of your hands to stabilize the load.
- Push up with your legs.
- Don't jerk up to a standing position. This isn't an Olympic event. Protect your back.
- Keep your path and your eye lines clear.
- Rely on your body weight to begin moving.
- Keep your elbows and arms close to your body while moving.
- Change directions by shifting your feet and turning your whole body.
- Ask for help if a load appears to be too heavy or awkward.

Use these tips even for objects that aren't heavy. Many people don't think they can get hurt by picking up light objects, but herniated disc symptoms are always ready to reveal themselves if you lift anything the wrong way.



## Chapter 5

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### *Proper Posture When Seated*

**P**roper posture doesn't come naturally; you have to train your body to sit and stand "correctly." Medical science has come a long way in the past few decades. Doctors and physical therapists at The Southeastern Spine Institute know the postures that place the least amount of strain on your back and your connective tissues.



Because it's relatively easy to see when someone isn't standing up straight, everyone gets a lesson in standing posture. Correct sitting posture, however, often gets left out of the training because it's so effortless. You're not fighting gravity so much when you sit.

But you can develop significant side effects from using improper sitting postures. Everyone is familiar with the back, shoulder and neck pain that occurs after sitting for long periods of time without concern for posture.

Other negative effects can include:

- Increased risk for developing cardiovascular disease
- Reduced circulation
- Gastrointestinal difficulties
- Headaches
- Bad mood
- Lower productivity

### *Invest in a Good Chair*

It helps to sit in an ergonomic chair that supports your lumbar and adjusts to suit your height. An effective chair has levers to tilt the chair so your buttocks touch the back of the chair while your feet are flat on the floor with your knees bent comfortably. It has lumbar support for your lower back that adjusts for both depth and height. The back should have adjustments for angle and height. The ideal seat is sufficiently padded and covered with a cloth material.

The following tips can help you maintain a healthy back when you're seated:

- Keep your back straight with your shoulders back
- Maintain an evenly distributed weight between both hips

- Put your feet flat on the floor with your knees slightly above your hip level
- Adjust the chair height so that your arms are in a straight line, nearly parallel to the floor
- Keep your head facing forward, in line with your core
- Shift positions slightly every 30 minutes
- Make small adjustment in your chair throughout the day

### *Sit Down, Stand Up*

It's not healthy to sit for more than an hour without standing up. Allow your circulation to move through your body as you stretch your back and legs. Walk around for a few minutes. Follow these tips to train your body to sit, stand and stay pain-free:

- Turn your entire body when pivoting in a chair that swivels or rolls; in other words, don't twist
- Move to the edge of your chair before standing and use your legs to stand, without bending forward
- Stretch into a back bend after sitting for long periods of time

## Chapter 6

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### *5 Tips for an Ergonomic Workstation*

**M**ost people spend 40 hours a week at work. If you work at a desk with a computer, that adds up to a lot of time spent sitting, typing or talking on the phone. Add in your free time at home surfing the Internet, writing email, watching videos or playing games, and you may easily spend 60 hours a week or more in a chair in front of a computer.

To the back specialists at the Southeastern Spine Institute in Charleston, spine health is a matter of vital concern. If you end up with back pain, it can affect your whole life, limiting your movement and taking the joy out of each day. Prevent a future of back pain by following these tips for setting up an ergonomic workstation, both at work and at home.



### *1. Find Your Neutral Position*

Spine health begins with how you naturally sit in an office chair. Put your feet flat on the floor. If you need to adjust your chair to the correct height, do it now. Sit back in the chair and relax your shoulders. Rest your hands in your lap. This neutral position should feel very comfortable, with no pain, no twinges, and no clenching.

### *2. Adjust to Your Desk*

Little things matter, like where you place your keyboard and mouse. Ideally, they should be no more than two inches above your thighs. Use a keyboard tray if you have one. If not, you can adjust the height of your chair, but if you do this, use a foot rest to keep your feet comfortable and your knees bent correctly. Your legs should never dangle. Also, never use a wrist rest, as it tends to hamper circulation.

### *3. Position Your Monitor Correctly*

Workstation ergonomics really do help to maintain your spine health. Place your monitor on the desk in front of you so that if you extend one arm, the middle finger of that hand just brushes the screen. That's about two feet. Your eyes should line up with the top quarter of the screen. If you have to look up at your screen, your neck pays the price. Finally, tilt the monitor down slightly to reduce the possible glare.

### *4. Sit Back in Your Chair*

It's worth investing in a comfortable, supportive office chair. Find one with adequate lumbar support to protect your lower back from strain. When you sit back in your chair, your lower back should be flush to the chair, your bottom should feel comfortable, and there should be a few inches of space between the seat and your knees. And of course, your feet should rest flat on the floor.

### *5. Don't Be Chair-Bound*

We've saved the best advice for last. Spine health includes movement, so don't sit all day long. Get up every few hours to stretch or walk around. The worst activity for your back is no activity. Taking a break is good for your eyes, too, and it helps you clear your head so you can be more productive. Be smart and healthy with an ergonomic workstation.

## Chapter 7

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### *Sleeping Tips for a Healthy Back*

**Y**our spine health relies on proper posture when sitting, standing, lifting and walking. But consider that you spend seven or more hours in a prone position every night. Sleeping, therefore, may be the most important time to tend to your back health.

When sleeping on your back, you place about 50 pounds of pressure on your spine. And while that position may prove to be the most comfortable if you have a back problem already, sleeping on your back may not be the best choice to prevent back pain.

#### *Maintain Your Healthy Back*

Take these tips for optimal back health:

- Place a pillow under your knees if you prefer to sleep on your back. You'll cut the pressure on your spine in half, to closer to 25 pounds.
- Sleep on your side with a pillow between your knees to reduce pressure on your back.
- Listen to your back. When a position hurts, change positions.
- Sleep with a pillow under your pelvis and abdomen if you can only sleep on your stomach.

- Lose the pillow under your head if your back feels strained while sleeping on your front side.
- Stretch your body out if you sleep on your side to prevent back pain that comes with sleeping with your knees pulled up high in the fetal position.



### *Back Health Recommendations*

If you have back pain or are suffering from a condition that affects your back, take these steps to enjoy restful, pain-free slumber:

- Sleep in a reclining chair or adjustable bed to relieve the pressure on your joints if you suffer from osteoarthritis.
- Use an egg crate foam top or buy a mattress with a thick, soft top if you have bursitis. Avoid the pain that comes from a mattress that's too firm.
- Lie on your stomach, with a pillow under your pelvis, if you have been diagnosed with a paracentral disc herniation.



- Rely on a firm mattress and flat pillow under your head and pelvis while sleeping on your stomach if you have degenerative disc disease.
- Curl your knees up closer to your chest if you have spinal stenosis. A reclining chair or elevated bed also can help relieve pressure with this condition.

### *Mattress Choices Make a Difference*

Price may influence your choice, but considering back pain cause and effect, you may want to reconsider your options. Weigh the characteristics of a mattress in terms of an investment in your back health — nay, your entire health. It's a proven fact that a good night's sleep results not only in less back pain, but also:

- Improved memory
- Creativity boost
- Increased lifespan
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduced inflammation
- Improved athletic performance
- Better learning abilities
- Sharpened attention
- Healthy metabolism
- Reduced stress
- Happiness

### *Look for the Best*

When poor sleeping habits become a primary back pain cause, all the other areas of your life suffer too. Losing deep sleep only serves

to aggravate your back condition while exacerbating other health issues. All the way around, your sleep is vitally important. To that end, choose your next mattress wisely to insure you get a sound sleep — and healthy back.

- Springs and coils are the components of a mattress that determine firmness. But what may be firm for one person may not be very solid to you. A high concentration of steel coils usually indicates a higher quality mattress.
- Padding also indicates quality. More padding typically is more expensive, but may be worth the cost for your comfort.
- High-priced materials don't always deliver the best mattress for you. Nor do you always need to pay top dollar. Stores often have sales — watch for them once you've determined the best mattress for your needs.
- Back pain from sleeping hasn't been thoroughly researched. No medical information exists touting the benefits of one mattress brand or type over another. So beware of advertising messages that claim otherwise.

### *You Be the Judge*

When you plan your next mattress-shopping trip, leave plenty of time to test-drive various models. You need to spend at least 20 minutes in the store on a mattress before you can relax enough to make a deliberate decision. Take off your shoes and settle into your normal sleep position. Dress comfortably so that you won't offend other shoppers, but so you can move around as you would in your own bed.

Splurge on a hotel room that carries the type of mattress you're considering for yourself. Because of the importance of a good night's sleep and the widespread problem of back pain, many

hotels market their mattresses and advertise the brand. Some even sell the mattresses they use through a retail division. The point is to try it before you buy it.

Personal preference ultimately is the best determination for a mattress. Once you realize the primary back pain cause is your current mattress:

- Determine the size you need
- Set a budget
- Research various brands
- Choose a couple trustworthy stores that allow you to lie on their merchandise
- Go for a perpendicular test drive
- Purchase mattress and box together to assure the box won't harm your new mattress
- Invest in a comfortable pillow
- Have a good night's sleep!

## Chapter 8

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# *3 Ways to Keep Your Spine Healthy as You Age*

**F**or optimal spinal health, you know to trust the doctors at the Southeastern Spine Institute in Mount Pleasant, SC. While you can take great care of your spine by exercising, eating right and seeking treatment for issues as they arise, there's no stopping Grandfather Time. He'll eventually come for a visit, so be prepared.



Aging is a gradual process that seems to sneak up on you. People certainly age differently depending on their levels of activity, diet, general health and attitude. Certain things, such as spinal deterioration, are just nature's way of slowing you down. After all, your spine has been holding you erect and serving as your nerve center for more than half a century — it's bound to get tired.

### *Natural vs. Unnatural Aging*

Besides protecting your spinal health as you age, the Southeastern Spine Institute doctors will remind you that the rest of the body ages too. Some changes are normal and expected; others are preventable. Your eyesight, for example, weakens no matter what if you live long enough. The lens thickens, causing you problems, especially when reading. In addition, you become more forgetful or have difficulty learning new subjects as you age. It's natural.

In addition, your bones shrink as you age, which leads to easier breaks and greater imbalance, but exercise and diet can alleviate drastic aging consequences. Finally, your skin loses collagen over the years, although your lifestyle plays a huge role in how far it goes. Exposing your skin to the sun and continuing to smoke will lead to unnatural and quicker aging.

### *Back It Up*

While heredity plays a big part in how well you age, there are a few steps you can take to minimize the effects of aging, especially when it comes to your spinal health:

#### *1. Get Sufficient Calcium*

Talk to your doctor at the Southeastern Spine Institute about calcium and your spinal health. Spine specialists at the Institute for Medicine recommend 1,000 milligrams of calcium a day for men

age 51 to 70 and 1,200 milligrams for women over 50. You can enhance that intake and keep your spine healthy by eating:

- Broccoli and kale
- Almonds
- Tofu
- Canned salmon
- Sardines
- Dairy products

## *2. Do the Right Exercises*

You don't need to win a Mr. or Miss Universe event, but lifting weights or doing other weight-bearing exercises in your daily workout routine can strengthen your muscles and bones, which help slow down spinal aging and its consequences. Slow down bone loss with exercises such as:

- Jogging
- Tennis
- Walking
- Climbing stairs
- Weight-lifting

## *3. Give It a Rest*

It's vital that you're comfortable at night, so you get the sleep you need for spinal health. Everyone, regardless of age, needs to rest at night. What you sleep on — the kind of mattress and pillow you use — isn't as important as how well you sleep.

When you have the right mattress, you awake rested and pain-free in the morning. Invest in a bed that provides such benefits as:

- Firmness that supports your back all along its natural curves
- Soft enough to be flexible at your hips and shoulders

In addition to sufficient calcium and a regular weight-bearing exercise routine, you should always lift, stand, sit, reach and bend correctly. Take a little extra time if you need it; despite getting older, there's no need to rush. To protect your spinal health, retirees will be better served by taking steps to slow the aging process while accepting the changes they can't do anything about.

## Chapter 9

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# Core Strength & Spine Health

The spine doctors at the Southeastern Spine Institute (SSI) understand that your spine health is connected to your overall health. To improve your overall health, you should exercise and eat right. But that advice alone doesn't help your spine. So take it to the next level with core strength exercises that benefit your spine and keep you pain-free.





Since there are varying levels of exercises, start with the easier ones and work your way up to the more difficult activities. They all help strengthen your core — the muscles in your abdomen, chest and mid-back. Remember, if you already have back issues, see your general practitioner or the spine doctors at SSI before starting any new exercise regimen.

### *Floor Exercises*

Spine doctors recommend that you consciously work your abdomen when doing these exercises:

- **Pelvic Clench:** While on your back with your knees comfortably bent, tighten the muscles in your lower abdomen and hold it for five seconds. It may help to clench your sphincter. The muscle you're working runs just inside the very top of your thighs on each side. Repeat five times.
- **Beginner Crunch:** Start on your back with your knees bent and your arms across your chest. Lift your legs so your thighs are perpendicular to the floor, crossing your ankles. Lift your head and shoulders off the floor and hold it for 10 seconds. Lower back to the floor. Repeat five times.
- **Torso Press:** Start on your back with your knees bent. Cross your arms over your chest. Using just your abdomen, curl your torso until your mid-back is off the floor. Hold it for five seconds and then lower yourself slowly. Repeat five times.
- **Bicycle Crunch:** Start on your back with your hands behind your head. Raise your feet slightly off the floor. Pull one leg at a time, knee bent, up toward your head while simultaneously pointing the opposite side elbow to your knee. Alternate legs a total of 10 times.

- **Plank Pose:** Start by resting on your stomach. Rise onto your elbows, clasping your hands together. Keeping your back straight and legs together, rise up onto your toes. Clench your abdomen and hold for 10 seconds. Lower yourself down to rest. Repeat five times.

### *Working with an Exercise Ball*

These exercises are deceptively difficult, so for your spine health, be careful or work with a trainer:

- **Prone Walkout:** Start with your chest on the ball. Walk your hands forward, keeping your abdomen clenched and your back straight, until the ball rolls all the way to your feet. Then walk your hands back. Repeat this three to five times.
- **Sitting Walkout:** Start by sitting on the ball with your back straight. Walk your feet forward, rolling onto your back and rolling the ball up to your neck. Again, keep your abdomen clenched. Lift and straighten one leg at a time, then roll back. Repeat three to five times.
- **Ball Crunches:** Start by sitting on the ball with your feet flat on the floor. Lean back as far as you can while keeping your feet in place, rolling the ball up to your mid-back. Sit back up using your abdomen. Repeat five times.
- **Partial Twist:** Start by sitting on the ball. Raise your arms directly overhead as you lean back to about 30 degrees. With one arm at a time, reach to your opposite knee. Repeat 10 times on each side.

Your spine health will benefit from these exercises, so you'll be less likely to need the services of spine doctors in the future. Your overall health will benefit too.

## Chapter 10

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# *Hamstring Exercises to Help Your Lower Back*

**W**hile anyone can suffer from lower back pain, men are more susceptible. Larger upper-body mass and an expanding belly put extra pressure on the lower back muscles and bones. Your lumbar spine, near your pelvis, carries all your upper weight. Fortunately, you can do back exercises today to ward off back pain tomorrow.

Hamstring exercises help you both prevent and relieve low back pain because of the way the muscles connect to your bones. Hamstring muscles run from the back of your thighs to your pelvis. If they're tight, they'll pull your pelvis down, which pushes your spine into an unnatural position that will eventually and inevitably cause lower back pain.

### *Don't Suffer*

Daily exercise may not automatically eliminate your back pain, however. Before beginning any new exercise regimen when you're experiencing acute low back pain, see your doctor. The spine physicians at the Southeastern Spine Institute can diagnose your problem, which is the first step to a cure. Often, you can resolve your pain easily enough and without surgery.

As long as your back pain doesn't stem from an accident or lifting injury, chances are that the following back exercises and stretches can help. Mild back pain may be caused by a pulled muscle or by poor posture. In these cases, exercise can relieve the pressure on your lower back, which reduces your pain.



### *Stretches and Back Exercises*

All of these back exercises work to stretch your hamstrings. For the best results, do them daily.

- **Prone Hamstring Stretch.** Lie on your back on the floor on top of a yoga mat or carpet. Wrap a towel or strap around the bottom of one foot, grabbing each end in your hands. Keeping a good grip on the towel or strap, slowly raise your leg into the air. With your leg straight, aim for a 90-degree bend. Hold for a count of 10 and then stretch your other leg. Repeat five times on each side.
- **Sitting Stretch.** Sit in a straight-backed chair at a comfortable height. Straighten one leg so that it's parallel to the floor. Stretch both arms toward the toes of that foot.

Hold for a count of 10, and repeat with the other leg. This stretch puts less pressure on your back while still giving you a good stretch. Stretch five times with each leg.

- **Straight-Leg Bend.** While standing at attention, bend from the waist, keeping your legs straight. You don't have to touch your toes; stretch down until you can feel the stretch in your hamstrings. Hold for a count of 20 and then straighten up slowly. You only need to do this stretch once.

### *Loosen Up*

In addition to stretches, you can do back exercises to loosen and strengthen your hamstrings:

- **Walking Balance.** Start by standing straight up. Take a step forward. As you lift your rear leg, bend forward at your waist about 90 degrees. Use your rear leg to help you balance. Hold for a count of 10, if possible. Straighten up. Take the next step and repeat on that side. Continue for half a minute or so.
- **Walking Dead.** Start the same way. Raise both arms in front of you, like a zombie might. Walk forward, but with each step, kick your leg as high as it will go toward your outstretched hands. Take 20 or 30 steps.

## Chapter 11

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# *Exercise Fads That Can Hurt Your Back*

**N**ew exercise trends come and go. Remember Jazzercise? Some exercise fads have a specific focus — weight loss or muscle tone, for example — but others may actually be bad for you. When an exercise becomes a back pain cause, you need to stop and reassess.

Back exercises should strengthen your upper and lower abdominal muscles, as well as the muscles in your mid-to-lower back. Back exercises should never hurt your back. In this case, what you don't know can hurt you.

### *Exercises to Monitor*

Jogging has been a fad for a long time now. It's generally a healthful activity that can benefit your heart, lungs, legs and organs. Your body likes movement. As back exercises go, though, jogging can jar your spine with its constant impacts. You also may develop foot or leg problems. So jog if that's what you do, but listen to your body if you start to feel any pain.

A more recent trend is using kettlebell weights when exercising. These handheld weights increase the intensity of your workout, but

also put extra strain on your abdomen and back muscles. If you're feeling strong and healthy, go ahead and work it, but keep tuned into your spine so it doesn't become a back pain cause.

Yoga is a non-impact activity that can benefit your back, as well as your whole body. Yet if you take a yoga class that's wrong for you, it can develop into a back pain cause. If you are new to yoga, don't do more than you're comfortable doing. Listen to your body when it comes to back exercises.



### *Exercises to Avoid*

CrossFit is the latest exercise fad to take the country by storm, but if you have a bad back, be warned this may not be for you. The idea behind CrossFit is to work the whole body to the point of exhaustion. It's great for athletes and young, fit people. For those who have already had back problems, though, it's a potential setback. Back pain causes all exercise to stop, so tread lightly.

One exercise trend you may not have heard of is ballet. While it is a viable fitness regimen, it has unforeseen dangers that can become a

back pain cause. Like yoga, ballet requires alignment and posture. You learn the poses and the moves while concentrating on your form. But this back exercise can put enormous pressure on your spine. Try something else.

Another new trend is Vibration Training. You stand on a specially designed machine that vibrates, helping you tone and lose weight at the same time. Unfortunately, there are cheap imitations available that actually can hurt you. Even the authentic machine can be a back pain cause if you use it improperly.

### *A Final Word of Advice*

Regardless what you do for back exercises, it makes sense to monitor the level of your intensity. Start slowly and work your way up to the more intensive exercises. Back exercises should never become a back pain cause. The goal is to strengthen your back and abdomen muscles, not to hurt them.

Finally, remember to maintain a healthy diet while exercising. Diets pose a different kind of fad challenge and have their own dangers. Good luck with your back exercises!



## Chapter 12

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# *10 Ways to Check Your Posture All Day*

**G**ranted, you may look better when you stand and sit up straight, but there are more reasons to maintain good posture than just cosmetic. Good posture is vital to your overall well-being. Good posture is also one of the most effective ways to reduce back and neck pain. While your Charleston spine health professionals can help alleviate your pain once it occurs, you can take daily steps to keep that pain from happening in the first place.

Poor posture puts unnecessary stress and strain on your muscles and spine. Your back actually can become permanently deformed from poor posture. These anatomical changes can lead to a host of complications, ranging from headaches and neck pain to constricted nerves and blood vessels, which can cause fatigue and even trouble breathing.

## *Good Posture Check-Up*

Good posture means that your body is aligned properly. Once you've corrected your posture problems when standing, the rest of your movements flow smoothly, leading to good posture in everything you do.



So take time throughout the day for a quick posture check by following these tips from the Charleston spine health doctors at the Southeastern Spine Institute. These ten tips are especially important if you sit at a desk all day:

1. Ask someone at work to watch you sit and stand while you do your job if you aren't sure about your posture. After observing you, your office buddy can point out when you slouch or bend incorrectly.
2. Place a small piece of paper on your head while you work at your desk. When it falls off, you're most likely on your way to the common slouch that plagues many office workers.

3. Catch yourself when you cradle a telephone between your shoulder and your neck. Many people do this all day long, but it can lead to permanent disfigurement.
4. Push yourself back in your office chair to take advantage of its lumbar support. Sliding forward in your chair leads to poor posture and back problems.
5. Set a timer so you move every 30 minutes. Shift in your chair — or more preferably, stand up and stretch. Keep the timer going until it becomes your habit to move regularly.
6. Stand beside a wall with your feet about six to 10 inches out, with your back and head touching the wall. Raise your arms to shoulder height and bend your elbows so your fingers are pointing up. Keeping your arms raised, touch your fingers to the wall. If you have to move your back or if your wrists can't reach the wall, poor posture is starting to take its toll.
7. Place a full-length mirror in your office or in your home in a spot that you can't avoid. Once you've identified what good posture looks like, you'll see when you're losing it.
8. Move the seat in your car so that you have to adjust it every time you get in the car. Adjust your seat so that your buttocks and your head touch the back of the seat.
9. Use visualization techniques to maintain good posture throughout the day. Imagine there's a string attached to the top of your head that's directly tied to the ceiling.
10. Identify a color or a picture that reminds you to check your posture every time you see it. Place it conspicuously so that you'll be reminded to check your posture regularly.

Positive spine health relies on your vigilance. Try these techniques to check for good posture all day, every day.

## Chapter 13

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# *The Best Shoes to Wear to Prevent Back Surgery*

If you feel a pain in your neck or your lower back, you may think you pulled a muscle — or worse, developed a slipped disc. Your pain, however, may have started in your feet. That's right, from the very tips of your toes to the curve of your arch, your feet play a major role in how your back feels. So start at your feet to prevent back surgery of any kind.



Just as cracks in the foundation of your house are a precursor to major structural issues, problems with your feet, the foundation of your whole body, often foretell back pain and subsequent surgery. Since your feet are so vital to your skeletal health, it's a wonder that so many people wear shoes that actually cause pain and can lead to serious back problems. Yet, it's common.

### *In Perfect Alignment*

When your feet are misaligned, the structure of your spinal cord is thrown off balance. An imbalance in how you place your feet can throw off your spinal column's alignment and lead to pain. When you have an issue with your feet, such as low arches or weak ankles, the wrong footwear exacerbates an already lurking problem. And more often than not, certain types of footwear actually create foot abnormalities, leading to back pain.

The worse culprits are not the fashion industry stylists, but consumers who buy into the fashion mandates. Otherwise intelligent people take chances with their feet by following the current trends with no thought toward the potential harm. Prevent back surgery by first avoiding these foot disasters:

- Flip flops
- Stiletto heels
- Pointy toes
- Ultra-high heels
- Ballet flats
- Platform shoes
- Wrong sized shoes

Instead, purchase shoes that support your arches and leave sufficient room for your entire foot. Ideally, shoes that'll help you prevent back surgery have:

- Adequate arch support
- Wide or chunky heels that are fewer than two inches high
- Flexibility at the toe box

### *Let's Get Personal*

Whether you have medical problems with your feet that need addressing — such as a hammer toe, flat feet or plantar fasciitis — you and your back may benefit from custom orthotics or specialized footwear. Inserts that target your problem areas put your feet into better alignment. Inserts also make it easy to move from shoe to shoe. And they not only help you prevent back surgery, they may provide you with additional energy while reducing your back and leg discomfort.

Specialized, fitted footwear, such as those recommended by your podiatrist and supported by your spine physicians, can be a little more expensive and restricting, but may be worth the price. They provide you with the support and structure ideal for your body and your back. So you may decide they're worth the extra cost.

Your feet form the foundation for your body weight. Take the first step towards a healthy back by wearing the shoes that are right for you. You may not make the latest fashion magazine, but you literally will be taking steps to prevent back surgery, back pain and the limitations that go with it. Fashionistas can't keep you out of the hospital, but orthotic inserts can.

## Chapter 14

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### *10 Driving Tips to Save Your Back*

**Y**our back is an incredible piece of machinery. It can create tremendous force (when you put your back into it), it is extremely supple (when you bend over backwards) and it is very forgiving when you abuse it (when you get your back up against the wall).



Back pain can put a real damper on your daily activities. No amount of spine tips can prepare you for the tingling sensations, aching and throbbing that occur when your back hurts. While the

spinal specialists at Southeastern Spine Institute can help you when you do develop back problems, you play the biggest role in preventing back pain in the first place.

### *Stand Up Straight, Young Man*

Remember when your mother nagged you about your posture? Most people can't wait to get away from that parental tongue-lashing. But Mom really did have the right idea (as she often does). Poor posture is one of the primary causes of back problems — and thoroughly avoidable.

You've heard plenty of spine tips regarding how to sit and stand, but few people talk about driving. If you have back pain, you're well aware of the long drives and constant stop-and-go traffic as you traverse the Holy City. If you're one of the many drivers who spends considerable time behind the wheel, heed these spine tips to keep your back healthy:

1. Take a few seconds to get comfortable when you first get in the car. The slightest irritation can end up creating major back discomfort and pain after a long drive.
2. Move the seat forward so you are sitting up straight. Your arms should comfortably rest on the steering wheel. When your seat is too far back, you must bend your back to reach the wheel and the controls, straining your back.
3. Place a small pillow or a rolled towel behind your lower back to give your lumbar extra support. This is particularly important when you undertake long drives.
4. Take your wallet out of your back pocket before you get in the car. A wallet, cell phone or any bulky item in your pocket sets your back out of alignment when you sit on it.



5. Pull your chin in slightly to your chest. This helps you keep your head straight and not bent out of alignment.
6. Adjust your seat so that your knees are slightly higher than your hips.
7. Change the settings on your seat every 20 to 30 minutes to prevent your body from staying in one position too long. Your body instinctively needs to move to keep limber.
8. Apply ice, wrapped in a towel or t-shirt, to your back the minute you feel any pain. Carry an ice pack in your drink cooler — because the sooner you ice any discomfort, the better chance you have of staving off even greater pain because most back pain results from inflammation. And ice is a sure way to reduce it.
9. Alternate ice with heat. Use a heating pad you plug into the car's power or from a hot water bottle or heated gel pack.
10. Stretch your back and hamstrings at every rest stop. Walk around to loosen up tightened muscles. Walking also helps to increase blood circulation that will reduce inflammation.

Of course, when back pain becomes unbearable, you may have to give up the wheel to a passenger and lie down in the back seat. You can't use any strong prescription painkillers while driving and if the ibuprofen isn't helping, you may need to stop driving to relieve your back pain. Charleston spinal doctors suggest that you don't have to forgo travel just because you have back problems. Follow these spine tips, keep yourself comfortable and enjoy the ride.

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For more information on preventing back pain and avoiding spinal surgery, contact the specialists at the Southeastern Spine Institute:

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