

BAD-A\$\$ THURSDAY ~ BACK IN BUSINESS

There has been a lot of talk recently about backs, back pain, and back injuries. I thought now would be a good time to share some reminders on back care and strengthening.

Exercises to strengthen your back

Back pain is a widespread concern, the degree of pain ranging from mild to chronically painful to serious problems like slipped discs that leave you bedridden. Note: This article does NOT apply to people with back injuries or slipped discs.

What causes back pain

Poor posture: Standing with your weight on one leg, slouching down and forward, or over arching your back puts a strain on the vertebral column. Sitting for long hours or leaning over a desk defies the natural curvature of the spine. Actions such as suddenly twisting backwards to reach for something, or bending down to pick up a heavy bag or even a baby, can result in injury of the muscles that surround the spine.

Weak back and abdominal muscles: The back is a very vulnerable joint. A group of muscles surround it to protect and strengthen it, as well as to enable its movement. These muscles include those in the back and abdomen. If your back muscles are weak, the spine is not supported properly, resulting in poor posture. The abdominal muscles need to be strong as well, to prevent a hyper-extended arch in the back, which could result in pain or injury. The arch of your lower back is the area that takes the weight of your torso, putting it under a lot of stress. Weak muscles and poor posture add to that, making the joint weak and liable to pain and injury.

To improve posture

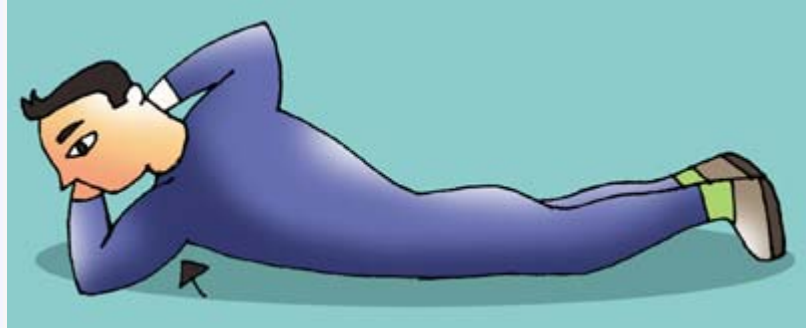
Stand with your back against a wall. The back of your head, your shoulders, hips and heels should touch the wall. Next, lift your chin so it is parallel to the floor. Pull your shoulders back a bit to open up the chest and keep the shoulders pulled down slightly (relaxed). Lift up your chest. Your hips should be relaxed, with your tailbone in a neutral position. In effect, your lower back should not be arched or rounded. Lastly, your kneecaps should be relaxed. Now, step away from the wall in this position and take a look at yourself in the mirror. This is the ideal posture. Maintain it while standing, walking or sitting. Keep checking yourself every now and then.

Next, we prescribe some exercises to strengthen your back. First, a warm-up to prepare your body for exercise is a must. Skipping the warm-up can make joints jerky, which is counter-productive. Go for a five-minute walk before you begin any exercise. Do the following four times a week. If your back is in pain on a particular day, omit all

exercises and do the stretches alone.

Note: These exercises are not for people with slipped discs or any other form of back injury.

Exercise 1: Back hyperextensions



Lie face-down on your stomach. Keep fingers linked under your face. Turn your nose down towards your hands. Keep your feet firmly on the floor. Contract your lower back muscles and raise your upper body until your chest comes off the floor, then lower yourself back. Exhale as you lift and inhale as you lower. Perform 12 slow repetitions.

Exercise 2: Prone leg raises



Continue lying face-down, head turned over to one side. Place your hands by the side of your hips. Keep your abdomen tightly contracted. Slowly raise your left leg off the floor, then lower it back slowly. Focus on squeezing the muscle above your hip.

Make sure your hips stay stable and don't move from side to side. Perform 8-10 repetitions on the right leg, then move to the left.

Exercise 3: Long bridge



Assume the posture depicted in the illustration: the head, shoulders, hips, knees and feet form a straight diagonal line. The hips should not drop down. Contract your back and hip muscles to hold yourself up. Hold this position for 15 seconds. Rest and then repeat. Keep breathing normally; do not hold your breath.

Exercise 4: Back Stretch



Lie on your back.

Pull the knees in towards your chest and hug them tightly. Hold for 10 seconds. Then, gently rock from side to side, massaging your back.

Exercise 5: Upper ab curls



This is a half sit-up. Lie on your back with knees bent and feet on the floor. Place your hands behind your head (more towards the neck) with fingers linked. Don't let the chin touch your chest. Keep your head in a comfortable position. Elbows stay out to the side.

Contract your abdominal muscles and raise your upper body until the shoulder blades come off the floor (elbows remain out to the side, don't let them come forward). Lower down until your head almost touches the floor. Don't let your head and arms rest on the floor. Lift up again just before they do. Exhale as you lift and inhale as you lower. Perform 12-16 slow repetitions.

Exercise 6: Reverse curls



This exercise works your lower abdominal region. Lie on your back. Keep hands alongside your hips. The upper body stays firmly fixed on the floor. The legs are lifted off the floor, knees bent at 90

degrees. Contract the lower abdominal muscles and lift the hips off the floor. Your knees will move in towards you.

Do not bend your knees. Slowly lower the hips. Exhale as you lift and inhale as you lower. Perform 12-16 repetitions.

Exercise 7: Plank



Assume the position depicted in the illustration. The head, shoulders, hips, knees and feet form a straight diagonal line. The back shouldn't sag down, nor should the hips go higher.

Keep the abdomen tightly contracted. Hold the position for 15 seconds. Rest and repeat.

Exercise 8: Ab stretch



Lie on your stomach and prop yourself up on your elbows. Dig your elbows into the floor and pull yourself upwards and forward. Hold for 10 seconds.

Avoid

Sitting for too long. Get up every half hour from your chair and walk

around a bit. Use a chair that is good for the back.

Sudden jerky movements.

Bending down/ leaning forward from the back and hip. Always bend from your knees to lift things.

Wearing high heels. They cause an unnatural curve in the back, causing or aggravating pain.

Walk

Walking is good for the back.

Walk for half an hour, four to six times a week.

Wear proper walking shoes and walk on a proper surface like the ground/ walking track in a park.

Avoid walking on roads.

Pamper your back

A hot shower or long soak in the tub eases the muscles, relieving pain.

A hot water bag every night before bedtime has a similar effect.

Get a massage, but make sure it's from a professional or you may end up making matters worse.

Sleep

Sleep on a firm mattress.

While lying on your side, place a pillow between your knees to comfort the back.

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