

Good news about bad backs

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Back pain is so widespread that up to 80 per cent of us are likely to have it at some time in our lives - after headache and the common cold, it's the most common cause of time off work. But the good news is that most back pain is caused by only minor problems and usually improves within two weeks.

But you may be surprised that the best remedy for back pain isn't to lie down and rest it - in fact that's the worst thing you can do. Doctors now say you'll recover faster if you try to keep doing your normal daily activities (as long as they don't involve heavy lifting or anything too strenuous), and take painkillers to help cope with the pain.

What causes back pain? Many injuries are a result of doing something quite trivial - you might injure a muscle or ligament simply by bending or twisting your body in an awkward way, or by lifting something incorrectly. Sometimes back pain is caused by problems with a disc - discs are like cushions which separate the vertebrae in the back and allow the spine to move in different directions. Sometimes the problem is arthritis, a common condition which causes joints in the spine to become inflamed.

But there are many things we can do to care for our backs and prevent problems:

- Avoiding weight gain
- Being active and enjoying regular exercise such as walking or swimming will help prevent and reduce back pain. Swimming is especially good for people with arthritis.
- Being aware of your posture. Stand as tall as possible but in a relaxed way. When sitting, avoid low or soft comfortable chairs and make sure there's support for your lower back - you can place a small cushion in the hollow of your

back. Sit back in the chair with your feet resting back on the floor.

- Think before you lift. Stand close to the object, keeping your back straight while you bend at the hips and knees. Hold the object close to your body and tuck in your chin and tighten your abdominal muscles. Keep your back straight and lift by straightening your knees. Avoid twisting movements. Carry objects in both arms close to the body and avoid carrying on one side.
- Think before you bend or twist. Rather than bend down to work or garden at a low level, it's better to squat or kneel. Arrange your work space so that frequently used items are within easy reach without bending or stretching.
- Keep your abdominal muscles strong - these muscles help support your back.

How can you tell if back pain is caused by more than a minor injury? If pain doesn't improve within a few days, or if you have a tingling feeling, numbness, or pain in the leg, see your doctor. Sometimes pain in the back can be a symptom of problems in internal organs. See a doctor if back pain is accompanied by symptoms such as fever or unexplained weight loss.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.

REVIEWED
May 2001
NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service