

## How Athletes Can Keep Their Spine and Back Healthy Without Surgery

Just 5 percent of people who have surgery actually need it, experts say

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More than 31 million Americans experience low-back pain and 65 million feel discomfort at other parts of the back, **according to** the American Chiropractic Association. About half of them have recurring episodes.

Back pain is not just a **common gym** and **cycling injury**. It is not just a condition of the elderly or blue-collar workers either, **Dr. Winifred Bragg** from the Spine and Orthopedic Pain Center says. Eight out of 10 Americans will feel the pain **at least once** in their lives. These are some worrying numbers because many of the problems are felt when it's too late to reverse them.

Soft tissue rheumatism, **strains**, and arthritis are common consequences of **untreated back pain**. The spinal disc can start wearing, leading to spinal stenosis when the canal gets narrowed and the nerves get pinched, causing a lot of pain **when walking**, she adds. Still, "if we have 100 people, only five really should need surgery, but there are 600,000 done a year," Dr. Bragg says. "And there is no guarantee that the pain will go away afterwards because didn't learn how to **protect their back before** [the operation]."

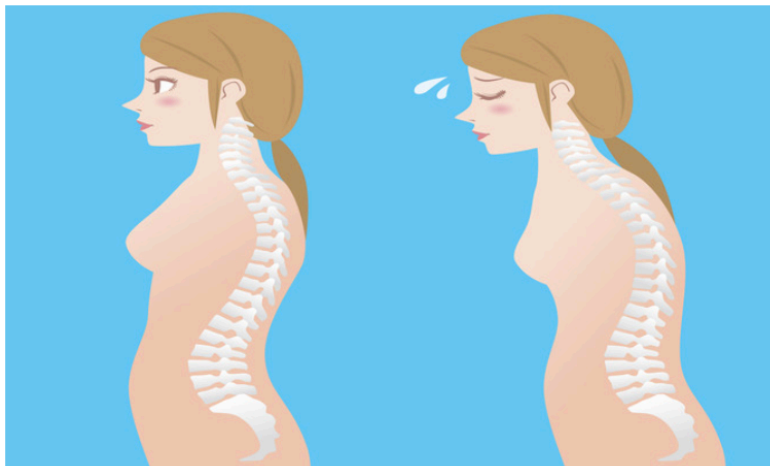
## Back pain contributors in athletes



**Repetitive bending and twisting** is the main cause of sprains, Dr. Bragg says. “Football players use a lot of force and get herniated discs,” she adds.

“Golfers have it from repetitive swinging.” The swings are very powerful. Considering how often move that way during practice and competitions, it’s no surprise they get injured often.

### Neutral spine



The biggest things to remember as an athlete, who moves and bends a lot and does all kinds of physical activities every day, is to **keep the spine in neutral** “as best you can,” Dr. Bragg says. “**Keep the core strong** and move more with your legs and hips, she adds.

Athletes have to work hard to protect their core **and back**. The two go hand in hand. Dr. Bragg says certain exercises people can do to strengthen both are half sit-ups, pelvic tilts, and **slowly performed bridges**.

Practice spinal stabilization with the Bird Dog move, an exercise always **recommended for people with back pain**. It may not look like much but this exercise will really **work out**

**your core.** Start by getting on all fours. Your back should always be straight. Reach out with one hand and extend the opposite leg. Engage your abs to maintain balance. Hold for a few seconds and switch.

### Back arch



Don't forget to stretch the back. People are in a **crunched position** most of the day and most sports don't usually require a move during which you arch the back backwards.

However, this move can be beneficial, Dr. Bragg says. "We all do things in flexion and you want to apply some counter force for balance," she adds.

### Manage pain at home



How athletes can manage pain depends largely on the **kind of injury**, Dr. Bragg says. In general, they should always remember to do **stretches and warm up** before any kind of activity, she adds.

Jumping jacks are a great start. After they are done training, they can apply ice to the area, she adds.

## Physical therapy



Even if physical therapy does not help much with pain, it definitely **won't hurt**. At the very least, you will learn about biomechanics and how to sit, stand and lift **properly** so you don't hurt yourself again, Dr. Bragg says.

Always first try physical therapy unless you have an emergency, she adds. You will strengthen the core muscles **and improve flexibility**, both of which are key to prevent back pain, and possibly surgery.

## Surprising causes of back pain



Bad diet, which leads to weight gain, is just one **surprising cause of back pain**. If the spine can't support your weight, it will hurt.

Worn out shoes can lead to changes in how you walk which can result in back pain (not to mention foot pain). "Heels should not be more than 2 inches high," Dr. Bragg says.

**Smoking causes** back pain too. When you inhale, your body loses oxygen. The cells that control body motion, including back movements, are not spared. If they don't have enough

oxygen to function, they won't and you'll feel the pain. **Studies** have shown that smokers are twice as likely to have back pain.

Purses should not weight more than 5 pounds. "You can't carry that bag of bricks all day and not except back pain," she adds. "Reduce the weight as much as you can."