

Get rid of backache for good!

Tired of struggling with back pain—or worrying about whether your next step or bend will set off another bout? Doctors say simple strategies like these can keep your spine strong, healthy and pain-free, fast—and for good!

A complex system of bones, muscles, discs, ligaments, nerves and joints that stretches from our necks to our tailbones, our backs are critical to the healthy functioning of our entire bodies.

"The problem is, we spend most of our lives abusing them," says physiatrist Joel Press, M.D., at the Center for Spine, Sports and Occupational Rehabilitation in Chicago. "Is it any wonder they give

The right vitamins can ensure you never have back trouble

us so much trouble?" At some point in our lives, eight out of 10 of us will experience back pain. Approximately 50 million Americans can expect at least one bout a year, and more than 13 million of us are already partially or totally disabled by back problems.

But it doesn't have to happen to you. Even if you've had back pain for years, experts say you can build a strong, healthy, pain-free back just by following these strategies:

Take the back-nourishing nutrients

Good nutrition supports your back in three ways, says naturopath and chiropractic doctor Gregory Tefft, N.D., D.C., Ph.D. "It keeps the bones of the spine strong and solid, its tendons and ligaments flexible, and the cartilage that normally cushions the discs of the spine resilient."

What's more, research from the medical journal *Spine* shows that eating a well-balanced, low-fat diet may also protect your back by keeping your arteries clear of plaque. The study found that 48% of people with low back pain also had artery blockage.

Already aching? The best treatment options

Doctors say most minor cases of back pain will clear up on their own, or with simple self-help measures, within a month or two. Just try:

- **Ice packs and heating pads.** Apply an ice pack to your back (for 10 minutes each hour) to reduce swelling and pain, says Dr. Press. After 48 hours, apply a heating pad for 15 minutes every hour, to increase blood flow to your aching back and help relax muscles and tissues.
- **Massage.** A study report-

ed in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* found therapeutic massage to be one of the most effective treatments for chronic low back pain.

● **OTC analgesics.** "Taking one or two aspirin or ibuprofen tablets every four to six hours can relieve pain and reduce swelling," says Dr. Press.

See your doctor if back pain is excruciating, gets worse, is accompanied by abdominal pain, numbness or tingling in the arms or legs, or persists for more than 48 hours.



Doctors say staying active is one of the best ways to maintain a strong, healthy back.

yoga are also good choices, he says—and consider a few stomach crunches. "The abdominal muscles work with the back muscles to stabilize the spine," says Dr. Blotner, "so if your abs are strong, you're less likely to strain your back."

Avoid common pain triggers

Statistics show that women's back pain tends to linger longer than men's, so it's important for us to avoid the injuries that lead to back problems. Our main sources of strain: "Activities like vacuuming, gardening and lifting heavy objects like grocery bags, laundry and children, all of which can easily strain the back,"

says rehabilitation specialist Winifred D. Bragg, M.D. To help reduce the risk:

- **Take a "fencer's stance."** When vacuuming, put all of your weight on one back foot, then step forward with the other foot as you push the vacuum cleaner forward and back. Use the back foot as a pivot when turning.
- **Bend your knees.** When picking up a child or lifting anything heavy, bend at the knees (not at the

"When the lumbar arteries become clogged with plaque, the supply of blood, oxygen and nutrients to the back is restricted, which slows their recovery from normal wear and tear," says Neal D. Barnard, M.D., author of *Foods that Fight Pain*. It can also lead to deterioration of the bones, muscles and cartilage and set you up for chronic pain.

The best way to protect yourself: fill your diet with low-fat, nutrient-rich foods, such as whole grains, vegetables, fruits and legumes, and supplement your diet with back-nourishing D, E and B vitamins and the minerals magnesium and calcium. "Calcium and vitamin D keep bones strong, the B vitamins and magnesium help protect against muscle cramping and nerve damage, and vitamin E fights the inflammation and free-radical damage that can lead to muscle aches and strains, pain and deterioration," says Dr. Tefft. "Along with a balanced diet, a daily multivitamin and an 800-1,200 mg. calcium supplement should give you all the nutrients you need."

Kick the habit

A new British study has revealed that smokers are 50% more likely to report debilitating back pain in

any given year—and a recent Israeli study has found that smoking increased the risk of back pain two-fold.

"Nicotine reduces the flow of blood, oxygen and nutrients to the back and weakens the entire spinal structure," says orthopedic surgeon Stuart Hirsch, M.D. The good news: your back can begin to recover, and some or even most of the damage may reverse itself once you quit smoking.

Stay active

Doctors used to recommend bed rest for back pain, but studies show that can actually worsen it! "Too much bed rest weakens muscles and the spine itself, slowing your recovery and making you more vulnerable to a relapse," says pain-management specialist Adrian B. Blotner, M.D. A better Rx: "Don't stay in bed for longer than two days," he says, "and try to get up at least once an hour to walk or stretch."

Actually, experts say regular exercise is one of the best ways to maintain back health, because it keeps the muscles that support it strong and limber. "Something as simple as a brisk walk for 15-20 minutes daily can really help reduce and prevent back problems," says Dr. Blotner. Swimming and

Too much bedrest can actually worsen your back pain

waist), and let your legs and abdominal muscles do the work instead of your back.

● **Sit up straight.** "Poor posture throws your spine out of alignment and puts stress on your lower back," says Dr. Bragg, who also recommends you avoid standing or sitting in one place for prolonged periods, since gravity compacts the spine and adds to its stress load.

If your work requires that you sit all day, get up every two or three hours for a quick stroll, and consider putting one foot on a stool when you're doing chores like dishwashing or ironing to help take pressure off your lower back.

—Linda Hamilton Paris