

PROTECTING YOUR BACK AT WORK

Low-back pain is a leading cause of job-related disability and missed work in the United States. The pain is so unbearable that Americans spend more than \$50 billion per year in an effort to make it go away. While low-back pain typically affects people around the ages of 30 to 50, most people suffer back pain (which is often work-related) at one time or another. But you can reduce your odds with a little bit of guidance and a healthy dose of prevention.

The first step is to assess your risk. People most at risk for back pain work in jobs that require frequent bending, lifting and twisting. You're also at risk if you are overweight, smoke or are inactive. Fortunately, with a few changes, you can reduce or eliminate many of these risks. Start by trying to quit smoking and perhaps losing a little bit of weight if you're overweight. And then make some changes at work.

Lifting Heavy Objects

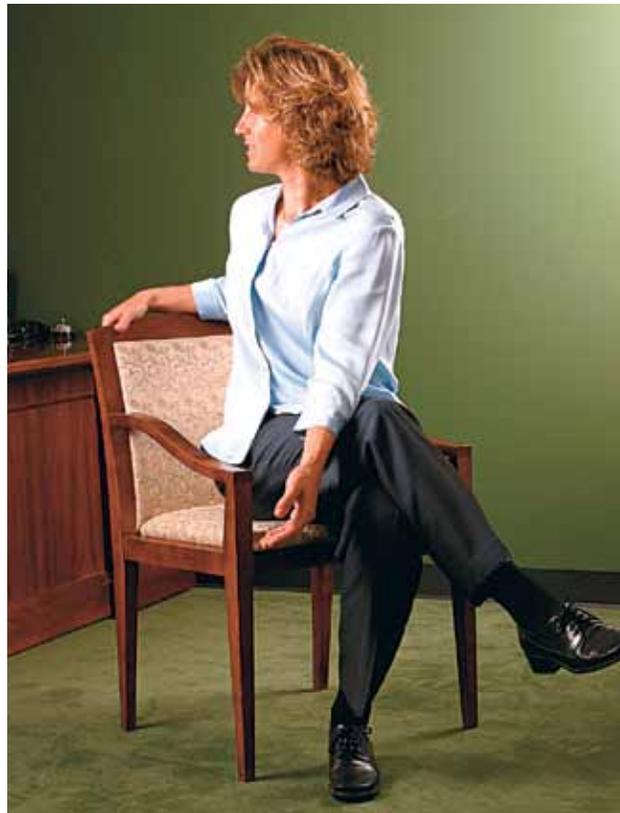
Many people suffer from low-back pain after improperly lifting a heavy object. Follow these tips to decrease your risk of injury.

- If you have to lift something that is too heavy, get help.
- Make sure your feet are at least shoulder-width apart so that you have a wide base of support.
- Stand as close to the object you're lifting as possible.
- Bend at your knees, NOT at your waist.
- Give your back support by contracting your abdominal muscles as you lift the object up or lower it down.
- Lift using your leg muscles, NOT your back.
- Hold the object as close to your body as you can.
- Do NOT twist or bend forward as you are lifting up or carrying the object.

Sitting on the Job

Sitting for hours at a time is a sure way to develop back pain. Your best bet is to take regular breaks to rest your back and relax. And if you have no other choice but to sit, at least take the following precautions:

- Support your lower back. Use a rolled towel, small pillow or a specially designed seat support.
- Sit with good form. Align your ears with your shoulders and keep your chin parallel to the floor. Avoid leaning to one side, and avoid overstuffed furniture that does



not offer adequate support. When you lean forward at your desk, bend forward at the hips instead of rounding your lower back. This will allow you to keep your back straight and in good alignment.

- Purchase a quality swivel chair so that you can work without twisting your back. (Placing your computer close to you also helps to minimize twisting and turning.) Make sure your chair has an adjustable seat, back rest and arm rests. The back rest spring should be adjusted so that the back rest moves with you. A seat that tilts forward is particularly useful.

Don't Forget to Exercise

People used to think that bed rest was the way to recover from low-back pain. In reality, exercise not only helps relieve chronic low-back pain, but it also helps prevent future pain.

Exercise can improve your posture, strengthen your back, increase your flexibility, and help you lose weight and avoid falls. A quality program includes aerobic activity (like walking, swimming, bicycling, group fitness classes), strength training (free weights, resistance bands, body weight), and stretching (yoga, tai chi). You can even do some of these activities at work—after prolonged sitting, take a quick 10-minute walk. Stash a yoga mat in your office corner, and on your next break do a few lower-back exercises and stretches. Need some more ideas? An ACE-certified Personal Trainer or Advanced Health & Fitness Specialist can help you adopt a safe, effective and fun way to keep your back and whole body strong.

Additional Resources

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke: www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/backpain/detail_backpain.htm

Medline Plus—Back Pain—Low: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003108.htm

American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons: www.orthoinfo.org

If you are interested in information on other health and fitness topics, contact: American Council on Exercise, 4851 Paramount Drive, San Diego, CA 92123, 800-825-3636; or, go online at www.acefitness.org and access the complete list of ACE Fit Facts.™



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