

The importance of protecting your back



Back pain is the most common cause of time off work in the UK¹ with around 10 million people living with the condition⁷. It can have many causes, from a sudden movement or a medical condition through to poor posture over a long period of time.

In many cases it won't be obvious what caused a back problem but even a mild ache or twinge in your back can seriously affect your lifestyle. It can make you move more slowly and carefully and even simple things, like getting out of a chair or picking up something from the floor, can become challenging.

Dealing with the pain can affect other areas of your health and wellbeing too. Your sleep may be disrupted and you may have to cancel activities you enjoy, such as family days out or sessions at the gym. It can also affect your mental health, making you feel anxious and depressed.

What can you do to protect your back?

Although back pain is common and can affect anyone, there are simple lifestyle changes you can make that can help to protect your back and prevent any problems.

Keep moving

The spine is designed for movement. Sitting in one position for extended periods of time can stiffen your back muscles and put stress on your spine. All kinds of movement stimulate blood flow, bringing important nutrients and oxygen to the structures of the back. This helps to prevent soft tissues in the low back from stiffening and aching which typically occur after sitting for a long time.

Exercise is a great way to help prevent back pain. Walking and swimming can help strengthen the back without putting any additional strain on it while low-impact workouts such as yoga and pilates can help to make the back muscles more flexible¹. Strengthening your core can also help to protect your back.

It's also important to be active throughout the day. Just 10 seconds of movement and stretching is better than sitting still so try to stand up and move around regularly.

Maintain a healthy weight

Being overweight can put stress on the back with obesity increasing an individual's risk of developing conditions such as osteoarthritis and back pain⁷. Maintaining a healthy weight can help to reduce this risk.

Lifestyle habits that can help you maintain a healthy, pain-free back

Your back is involved in everything you do, from how you stand to how you sleep. We've put together some handy tips that will help you avoid back pain, whatever you're doing.

Posture

- Avoid slouching and hunching your shoulders.
- Try not to hover over laptops, tablets and smartphones with your head down. Your head is actually heavy, and your neck was designed to hold it up rather than forward.

Sitting¹

- Keep your stomach muscles pulled in and maintain the proper curve in your lower back
- Keep your knees and hips level and your feet flat on the floor
- Stand up and move around periodically to stretch tight muscles and give them a chance to relax

Using a computer²

- Keep your shoulders relaxed and down and your head directly over your shoulders, about an arm's length from the screen
- Elbows and wrists are relaxed, with elbows at just more than right angle
- Take a break from the keyboard or mouse every 10 to 20 minutes. This could be standing up, stretching, drinking water or simply taking your hands off the keyboard or mouse
- If you use display screen equipment such as a computer as part of your normal work, your employer will conduct a workstation assessment for you to ensure it is set up correctly⁶

Lifting heavy objects^{1,3,4,5}

- Squat down with your feet shoulder-width apart and your back straight to pick up the weight. This lets you lift with your legs, which are much stronger than your back
- Hold your tummy in, brace your back and look up as you lift
- Always lift and carry heavy objects close to your body
- Never twist and bend at the same time
- Be sensible: get help to lift objects that are too heavy to lift on your own

Standing¹

- Stand upright and balance your weight on both feet
- Keep your stomach muscles pulled in and your feet shoulder-width apart
- Move, stretch or take short breaks to release any tension

Stress

- Avoid stress as it can cause you to tighten your shoulder and back muscles, and could eventually lead to back pain
- Consider exercise, mindfulness and relaxation techniques to help you deal with stress

Sleep¹

- If you sleep on your back, place a pillow under your knees to help you maintain the natural curve of your back
- Sleep on your side with your knees bent if you can

1. [University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust | Back pain prevention \(uhb.nhs.uk\)](https://www.uhb.nhs.uk/back-pain-prevention/)

2. [Desk health ergonomics — Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust \(chelwest.nhs.uk\)](https://www.chelwest.nhs.uk/health-ergonomics/)

3. [Safe Lifting for Parents and Carers of children with additional needs \(torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk\)](https://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/safe-lifting-for-parents-and-carers-of-children-with-additional-needs/)

4. [705-Top 10 Tips for Back Pain.pdf \(backcare.org.uk\)](https://www.backcare.org.uk/705-Top-10-Tips-for-Back-Pain.pdf)

5. [Manual Handling: Health and Safety \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk/manual-handling/)

6. [Workstation assessments - Display screen equipment - HSE](https://www.hse.gov.uk/workstation-assessments/)

7. [The State of Musculoskeletal Health 2021 \(versusarthritis.org\)](https://www.versusarthritis.org/the-state-of-musculoskeletal-health-2021/)

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