

# Back Care and Preventing Injuries: Care Instructions



## Overview

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You can hurt your back doing many everyday activities: lifting a heavy box, bending down to garden, exercising at the gym, and even getting out of bed. But you can keep your back strong and healthy by doing some exercises. You also can follow a few tips for sitting, sleeping, and lifting to avoid hurting your back again.

Talk to your doctor before you start an exercise program. Ask for help if you want to learn more about keeping your back healthy.

**Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety.** Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

## How can you care for yourself at home?

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- Stay at a healthy weight to avoid strain on your lower back.
- Do not smoke. Smoking increases the risk of osteoporosis, which weakens the spine. If you need help quitting, talk to your doctor about stop-smoking programs and medicines. These can increase your chances of quitting for good.
- Make sure you sleep in a position that maintains your back's normal curves and on a mattress that feels comfortable. Sleep on your side with a pillow between your knees, or sleep on your back with a pillow under your knees. These positions can reduce strain on your back.
- When you get out of bed, lie on your side and bend both knees. Drop your feet over the edge of the bed as you push up with both arms. Scoot to the edge of the bed. Make sure your feet are in line with your rear end (buttocks), and then stand up.
- If you must stand for a long time, put one foot on a stool, ledge, or box.

## Exercise to strengthen your back and other muscles

- Get at least 30 minutes of exercise on most days of the week. Walking is a good choice. You also may want to do other activities, such as running, swimming, cycling, or playing tennis or team sports.
- Stretch your back muscles. Here are few exercises to try:
  - Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Gently pull one bent knee to your chest. Put that foot back on the floor, and then pull the other knee to your chest. Hold for 15 to 30 seconds. Repeat 2 to 4 times.
  - Do pelvic tilts. Lie on your back with your knees bent. Tighten your stomach muscles. Pull your belly button (navel) in and up toward your ribs. You should feel like your back is pressing to the floor and your hips and pelvis are slightly lifting off the floor. Hold for 6 seconds while breathing smoothly.
- Keep your core muscles strong. The muscles of your back, belly (abdomen), and buttocks support your spine.
  - Pull in your belly, and imagine pulling your navel toward your spine. Hold this for 6 seconds, then relax. Remember to keep breathing normally as you tense your muscles.
  - Do curl-ups. Always do them with your knees bent. Keep your low back on the floor, and curl your shoulders toward your knees using a smooth, slow motion. Keep your arms folded across your chest. If this bothers your neck, try putting your hands behind your neck (not your head), with your elbows spread apart.
  - Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Tighten your belly muscles, and then push with your feet and raise your buttocks up a few inches. Hold this position 6 seconds as you continue to breathe normally, then lower yourself slowly to the floor. Repeat 8 to 12 times.
  - If you like group exercise, try Pilates or yoga. These classes have poses that strengthen the core muscles.

## Protect your back when you sit

- Place a small pillow, a rolled-up towel, or a lumbar roll in the curve of your back if you need extra support.
- Sit in a chair that is low enough to let you place both feet flat on the floor with both knees nearly level with your hips. If your chair or desk is too high, use a foot rest to raise your knees.
- When driving, keep your knees nearly level with your hips. Sit straight, and drive with both hands on the steering wheel. Your arms should be in a slightly bent position.
- Try a kneeling chair, which helps tilt your hips forward. This takes pressure off your lower back.
- Try sitting on an exercise ball. It can rock from side to side, which helps keep your back loose.

## Lift properly

- Squat down, bending at the hips and knees only. If you need to, put one knee to the floor and extend your other knee in front of you, bent at a right angle (half kneeling).
- Press your chest straight forward. This helps keep your upper back straight while keeping a slight arch in your low back.
- Hold the load as close to your body as possible, at the level of your navel.
- Use your feet to change direction, taking small steps.
- Lead with your hips as you change direction. Keep your shoulders in line with your hips as you move. Do not twist your body.

- Set down your load carefully, squatting with your knees and hips only.

## When should you call for help?

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Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if you have any problems.

### Where can you learn more?

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Go to <https://www.healthwise.net/PatientEd>

Enter **S810** in the search box to learn more about "**Back Care and Preventing Injuries: Care Instructions**".

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