Oh, My Aching Back!

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"Building Better Bodies"
Oh My Aching Back!

Back pain and back injuries are very common in our society. In fact, approximately 60 to 90 percent of all U.S. citizens will experience at least one back injury in their lives. Half of these people will experience multiple episodes of back problems.

Many will undergo surgical procedures, and roughly 10 percent will see their condition become chronic. The ultimate cost to society in lost productivity and health-care resources totals in the billions of dollars. In 2006, over $90 billion dollars was spent on back pain, surgery, medications, and therapies.

An even higher price, however, is paid by the people who have lost the ability to participate in the activities they most enjoy. Back problems can make fishing, golfing, or even just playing with children and grandchildren fraught with pain. In the worst cases, a back problem can interfere with even the ability to get dressed.

Despite all this, people still take their backs for granted, not realizing the dangerous positions they put their backs in every day. Almost everything you do requires the use of your back, and back problems are rarely the result of a single activity or accident.

Most injuries occur over a period of years or even decades, as a result of various factors -- how you sleep or sit, what you eat, or how you deal with the emotional stresses at home and work.

Pay Attention and Protect Your Back:

**In bed:** Use a quality mattress, be careful getting in and out of bed.
**In the morning:** stretch, stand upright at the bathroom sink, use your legs addressing the toilet, getting dressed.
**In the car:** Getting in and out, not twisting to reach something in the back seat.
**At the office:** How much sitting do you do? Get up and stretch, take breaks.
**While exercising:** Use a foam roller, and stretch before exercise.

Protecting Your Back While Exercising

There is nothing more important to the health of your back than exercise. Exercise strengthens and stretches back muscles, lubricates facet joints, and feeds the disks. The appropriate back exercise routine performed regularly and correctly is the best gift you can give your back. Here are some tips:
Start Regularly and Sensibly

Try to choose a variety of exercises that will condition different areas of your back and total body. If you have not exercised for a while, see your physician for a general checkup before starting your program. Also, if you are under the care of a physician or therapist for a concern related to your back or other joints, make sure they approve of your exercise regimen. Some exercises can increase your pain or make your situation worse, so let your health-care consultant guide you to the best ones for you.

As you start an exercise program, remember: You did not get out of shape in a day or a week; you will not get back into shape that quickly either. Therefore, start off slowly and be patient. Starting off too quickly will only increase soreness. To begin with, do your exercises three days per week, skipping a day between exercise days.

Take Your Back for a Walk

Walking may be the best activity for your spine and one of the easiest exercises to incorporate into your daily routine. The walking motion uses many of the muscles of the back, and as these muscles turn on and off, they gently pull and move the bones in your spine. These movements strengthen the muscles and lubricate the facet joints. Your walk should start slowly for about the first five minutes and then progress to a moderately brisk pace. When you walk, pretend that you are balancing a book on top of your head. This trick not only insures good posture during the exercise but also trains the muscles of your spine and stomach to hold you in good posture throughout the day.

Climb Stairs

As your conditioning improves, you can probably move on to a more advanced exercise, stair climbing. The benefits for your back are many, but stair climbing is strenuous to your total body; your heart, lungs, and legs all have to work hard with your back to perform this exercise. Before starting this one, make sure you really have the physical fitness level to tolerate it. Pushing yourself too quickly can lead to a back injury. When you use the stair climber, stand up as if you have a book on your head. Too many times you will see people slumped over forward as they perform this exercise. Although in certain instances there is a reason to perform the exercise that way, from your back's perspective, you should stand up straight.
Choose Cycling Instead

Almost as important as choosing an exercise that you need is choosing an exercise that you enjoy. After all, if you can't get yourself to do it, then it's not going to help you. Pick an exercise that you can look forward to doing regularly.

Riding a bicycle can be a good exercise for your body. It works the legs, the heart, the lungs, and, of course, the back. You do have to be careful about your posture with cycling, though. People tend to slump when riding, because they are tired and should rest, or because they are just not thinking about their posture. Be aware of your posture.

How the seat and handlebars are set can make a big difference in your back position. Stationary and mountain bikes are probably the best types for your back, because they sit you upright more than road and touring bikes do. The latter types usually have drop handlebars, which force you to bend over and round your back. If you usually stand on your feet all day long, you might actually benefit from exercise on a road bike in a bent over, yet supported, position. For most people, though, setting the handlebars up high enough to lean on without slumping over is best.

Set the seat height such that you bend slightly at the knee when the pedal is in the down position. If you raise the seat too high, you can make your back bend from side to side and rotate too much as your feet try to reach the pedals. This twisting can irritate your back. As you ride your bike, remember that you are doing it for your back and your good health, not for competition. Keep your gears set so that pedaling is easy. Your back will get a lot of exercise without a lot of irritation if you keep it in low gear.

Try Swimming

Maybe cycling just isn't an option for you. Exercise in the water may be more your style, and it certainly can feel great on your back. Water supports your body, and when the temperature is moderately warm, swimming warms muscles and opens blood vessels, relaxing your back. Also, the motion of swimming uses almost all of the muscles in and around your back and increases joint lubrication and overall flexibility.

Even if you are an out-of-shape novice for whom swimming seems too strenuous, you can learn to use the water to your advantage. If you are not a good swimmer, try using a flotation device so you can stay afloat without exhausting effort. For example, a wet vest allows you to walk or run in deep water without touching the
bottom of the pool. You don't even have to know how to swim at all to wade through the shallow end of the pool and receive the benefits of the water's resistance and buoyancy.

You can also swim with a flotation device. For example, hold one between your thighs to keep your legs on top of the water with your upper body. You can also get hand paddles so that you can move through the water with less effort while still receiving the benefits for your back. Be aware that the water, even though it feels invigorating while you are in it, does provide a lot more resistance to the movement of your arms, legs, and body than you may be accustomed to. This can tire you out quickly and leave you fatigued for some time. Start out easy, and progress more slowly than you might with some other activity, such as walking.

Exercise alone won't be enough to keep your back limber. For some easy and effective stretches you can do to keep your back loose, turn to the next section.

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Stretches for Your Back

In addition to conditioning, a good exercise regimen must include flexibility. Keeping the muscles and other tissues around your spine limber is very important. The following stretching exercises involve the muscles and tissues around your spine and those around your pelvis and legs that indirectly affect your spine's flexibility.

Remember the correct technique when performing any stretch: Stretch the tissues only to the point of mild tension, hold the stretch without bouncing for at least ten seconds, and then, let the muscle totally relax. To receive the maximum benefit from a stretch, repeat it at least three to five times. Remember also that your muscles tend to return to their shortened position after you stretch them. So stretch several times throughout the day.

Start With the Hips

The hip stretch is a good starting exercise. It stretches the muscles around the hips and buttocks and on the side of your low back. Lie on your back with both legs outstretched. Grasp behind your left thigh, and gently pull your left leg, with the knee relaxed, toward your right shoulder until you feel a mild, comfortable stretch. Let your arms do the majority of the work, pulling the thigh toward the opposite shoulder. Your leg should be totally relaxed. Try to breathe comfortably; resist the tendency to hold your breath. At the end of the stretch, relax the muscles by allowing your left thigh to move back to the starting position on the floor. Perform the stretch the same way with the right leg. Alternate legs, and continue until each leg has been stretched at least three times.

Stretch Your Hamstring

The hamstring stretch exercises the muscles on the back side of your thighs. The hamstring muscles affect your ability to bend forward; when tight, they can make it hard to tie your shoes or pick up objects off the ground. Tight hamstrings also increase the pressure on your low back when you bend. So when these muscles are not stretched out to adequate lengths, your back suffers the consequences. If you sit most of the day, this stretch is particularly important, because the hamstring muscles become shorter when they are kept in the contracted, seated
position for long periods. By stretching these muscles daily, you will find that your back can perform a lot more work without as much discomfort.

Lie down on your back next to a doorway with your left leg outstretched on the floor, your right hip next to the doorjamb, your right knee bent, and your right leg going up the door facing. If you are positioned correctly, your right buttock should be touching the door facing. Keeping your right knee bent, place the heel of your right foot on the door facing. Gently press your right thigh toward the facing, straightening your right knee until you feel a mild stretch in the back of your right thigh. Hold this position for at least ten seconds. If you feel the stretch behind your knee rather than in your thigh, your calf muscles may be tight; they should be stretched before you continue to stretch your hamstring. Repeat the exercise with the left leg. Alternate legs and continue until each leg has been stretched three times.

Use a door or wall for support.

Flex Your Hip Flexors

You may have never even heard of hip flexors, let alone know where they are, but this group of muscles is very important to the health of your back. The hip flexors are the muscles that work together to lift your thighs as you walk. When you pick up your leg to take a step, you are actually giving the signal to the hip flexors to contract -- thus, pulling your thigh and picking up your leg.

What does this have to do with your back? When you sit a lot, these muscles, like your hamstring muscles, tend to shorten, and then when you stand, they tilt your pelvis forward. Your pelvis, in turn, pulls on your low back and drastically increases the amount of curve in your spine in much the same way that high-heeled shoes can. This excessive curve forces the facet joints together, causing pain. If you keep your hip flexors stretched and limber, they will return to the proper length, and they won't tug on your low back.
To stretch the hip flexors, kneel down on your left knee. (Put your knee on a thick pillow so that it does not press too hard into the floor.) Put a chair or other support next to you for balance. Holding the support, put your right leg out in front of you so that your right knee is almost straight and your toes are pointed straight ahead. Keeping your upper body upright, gently allow your body weight to shift forward, bending your right knee, until you feel a mild stretch on the front part of your left hip. Hold this for at least ten seconds. Relax and repeat the stretch with the opposite leg and hip. Remember that you may want to do this stretch several times during the course of the day, because the hip flexors, like your other muscles, tend to return to their shortened position over time.

**Try a Press-Up**

Many of the activities of everyday life reduce the amount of normal inward curve in your low back -- sitting and bending forward among them. This loss of inward curve may contribute to many back and spinal problems, especially bulging or herniated disks, and it can certainly be a major source of pain. You can reduce your pain and help heal your back by returning the normal inward curve to your low back with this exercise.

Lie on your stomach with your body outstretched and your hands under your shoulders. Keeping your hips in contact with the floor, gently press your upper body off of the floor until you feel mild tension in your low back. Hold this position for at least ten seconds. At first, you may only be able to raise yourself a small distance off of the floor; don't think you have to straighten your elbows. In time, you may be able to press-up to that point, but take it slowly. It may take months to put back into your spine the curve that was lost over years. Remember to breathe normally and repeat the stretch three to five times for the most benefit.
Try Lumbar Rotation

Rotation is one of your spine's normal and vital motions. Any time you reach out with one arm, your spine rotates as your arm extends away from your body. An injury or a strain can, of course, limit your spine's ability to rotate, but some normal activities performed over and over to one side can have the same effect. Exercising your spine's ability to rotate in both directions will help your back stay mobile and pain free. The lumbar region of the spine is the part that runs through your low back, and its rotational flexibility is the focus of this exercise.

Lie on your back with your hips and knees bent. Your knees should be pointing straight up. Your feet should be flat on the floor with your heels up near your buttocks. Lay your arms out on both sides of your body, and gently allow your knees to drop toward the floor on the left side until you feel the stretch in your low back. Don't worry if your knees don't make it all the way to the floor before you feel the stretch. Only go to the point of mild tension, not beyond. Eventually, you may be able to go all the way, but don't push it. Hold the stretch for at least ten seconds. Then, return your knees slowly to the starting position, and repeat the stretch to the right side. Alternate and repeat the stretch three to five times on each side.

In addition to the exercising you do to keep your body in shape, there are specific exercises you can try to strengthen the muscles that support your back. Turn to the next section to learn how.
Exercises for Your Back

The muscles of your back support your upper-body weight, enable you to move, and protect the spinal structures from harm. While the muscles must maintain a certain degree of flexibility, they also need strength and endurance. Strength is the ability to lift a very heavy object one time, and endurance is the ability to lift lighter objects many times. For example, when you lift a spare tire out of your trunk, you require a great deal of power for just a few seconds; this is strength. But if you spill a bag of potatoes in your trunk and have to stay bent over as you retrieve them, you need a prolonged, sustained expenditure of energy; this is endurance.

The muscles around your spine need to maintain both strength and endurance to perform their functions properly. The less strength and endurance your muscles have, the greater the risk of strain or injury, and in the case of back muscles, this injury could involve the structures and tissues that the muscles support and protect -- bones, joints, disks, and nerves. Keep your strength and endurance up so that you won't let your back down.

Try a Curl-Up

Your stomach muscles may be your back's best friend. They wrap three quarters of the way around your low back, and when combined with your back muscles, which complete the loop around your low back, they provide support to all sides of your spine like guy wires supporting a tower. If the wires on one side of the tower become loose, the tower will lean toward the wires that are still tight. This is essentially what happens to the spine when the stomach muscles lose their strength. Because they attach to both the ribs and the pelvis, when they weaken, they lengthen as the stomach is pulled down and out by gravity. This lengthening ultimately ends up causing a pot belly, or beer belly, appearance, and an exaggerated curve develops in the low back. The excess curve, in turn, compresses the facet joints, which scream with pain with even simple activities. You can maintain better posture, a better overall appearance, and a healthier back by strengthening your stomach muscles.

Lie on your back with your knees up and your hands together between your thighs (left). Lift your upper body off the floor until your shoulder blades are no longer touching (right). Slowly return to the starting position.
The best exercise that the beginner can do to strengthen stomach muscles is the curl-up. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Hold your hands together between your thighs and gently lift your head and upper body only until your shoulder blades are off of the ground. (A curl-up is not a sit-up, so don't bring your body all the way up.) Then, return to the starting position on the floor. Move slowly so your muscles get a good strength workout on the way up and on the way down. Taking it slowly also helps to prevent you from pulling anything. Start with 5 to 10 lifts, or repetitions, and over the course of a few weeks, try to progress to 25 to 30 repetitions without stopping. Use good technique, don't get sloppy, and don't forget to breathe normally.

**Strengthen Your Upper Back**

There are many smaller muscles in the upper back, between the shoulder blades, that also need strengthening. For this exercise, stand with one foot in front of the other and take a small can of soup in each hand. Bend your knees and allow your upper body to bend forward at the hips. With your elbows bent, hold the cans together in front of your belly button. Keeping your head up, slowly lift your hands toward the ceiling, leading with your elbows. As your hands are moving toward the ceiling, gently squeeze your shoulder blades together. Stop the movement when your upper arms are parallel with the floor. Return to the starting position and repeat 10 to 15 times.

**Strengthen the Postural Muscles**

Certain muscles around the spine play more of a role in maintaining good posture than others. Strengthening these muscles will give you better posture without much effort. You will have trained them to do the job on their own so that you won't have to consciously think about your posture.

To condition these muscles, lie on your back with your feet flat on the floor and your heels up next to your buttocks. Rest your arms at your sides with the backs of your hands touching the floor and your palms up. Gently press and hold the small of your back against the floor by tightening your stomach muscles. Without your hands, arms, shoulders, shoulder blades, spine, or head losing contact with the floor, slowly slide your hands and arms away from the sides of the body. Move your arms slowly so that you can monitor whether you are maintaining contact with the floor. Your goal is to get your hands and arms outstretched over your head without any of the body parts mentioned leaving the floor at any time.
This exercise can be harder to do than it sounds. Weak and tight muscles make it very difficult to complete this exercise without losing contact with the floor. If this happens to you, stop the exercise at the position where you lost contact and your body tightened up, and hold that position for about five seconds. Whatever you do, do not force your body into an awkward or straining position. Slowly bring your hands and arms back to the starting position following the same technique. Take a deep breath and start again. Repeat the exercise three to five times.

Once you can easily move your hands over your head without losing contact with the floor, try the exercise standing against a wall. Place your feet about six inches from the wall with your knees and hips only slightly bent. Follow the same technique, but this time, don't lose contact with the wall.

**Strengthen Your Lower Back**

Finally, it's time to strengthen the muscles that are mainly responsible for supporting your spine -- your lower back muscles. These muscles are involved in sitting, standing, walking, pushing, pulling, lifting, and carrying; back muscles work all day. In fact, you really cannot move at all without using these muscles.

The strength exercise for your low back is much like the curl-up, only upside down. Lie down on your stomach with your arms at your sides and your forehead resting on the ground. Start with your head, and slowly lift your upper body off of the floor as far as you comfortably can without straining yourself. Then, slowly lower your chest back to the floor and repeat 5 to 10 times. As you progress, see if you can do 15 to 20 consecutive lifts using good technique. Remember to breathe normally.
Use the Assisted Squat

Many of the exercises already described prepare your body to perform more demanding exercises. Squatting is a demanding exercise, requiring many muscles to work together. Learning to squat correctly is very important, because you can use the squat technique to lift heavy objects without straining your back. The assisted squat will train your muscles to perform this maneuver correctly and build strength in some of the key muscle groups.

Straddle the threshold of a doorway with your feet slightly wider than shoulder-width apart and with your weight on the balls of your feet. Grasp the doorjamb with both hands at about chest level. Slowly lower your body toward the floor by bending your knees and hips and letting your buttocks stick out. Don’t just let yourself drop toward the floor; go slowly to prevent injury and maximize the workout. When the tops of your thighs are parallel with the floor, stop and slowly return to the starting position.

Facing the side of the door frame with your feet slightly more than shoulder-width apart, grasp the frame with both hands (left). Keeping your back straight, letting your buttocks stick out, and holding most of your weight with your arms, drop slowly toward the floor by bending your knees (right). When your thighs are parallel to the floor, slowly return to the starting position and repeat.

When performing the exercise, remember to keep your head up, shoulders back, and spine erect. Let your arms support much of your weight; this minimizes the stress placed on the hips and knees and makes the correct positioning easier to maintain. Initially, repeat the exercise 5 to 10 times, and try to build your strength until you can perform 20 to 25 consecutively. Remember to use good technique, because learning good positioning and posture is part of the reason for this exercise.

If this motion hurts your knees, see if not going down as far prevents the discomfort. The depth of the bend is not the most important aspect. If the pain continues, though, stop the exercise, and discuss your knee concerns with your physician.

Probably the most common reason why people injure their backs is that they pulled a muscle while trying to lift a heavy object.
Protecting Your Back While Lifting

No matter how hard you try, avoiding all the situations that may be stressful to your back is impossible. Sometimes you have to lift heavy objects. Of course, as the weight of the object increases, so does the risk of injuring your back. However, the actual stress on your back is also related to the position of your body when you lift the object. Understanding how body positioning affects your activities is called body mechanics. You can decrease your chance of a back strain or injury by using good body mechanics.

Before you lift any object, you must first make sure that you are capable of lifting it. You can safely lift only a certain amount of weight. Even if you are extremely strong and you can lift 300 pounds by yourself, attempting to lift 310 pounds would be futile and hazardous -- your chance of injury increases dramatically with every pound over your limit. So the first thing to do when lifting an unfamiliar object is to test its weight, or load. Pushing it with your foot is usually enough to give you an idea.

Use the Squat Lift

After you have determined that you can lift the object, position yourself over the object, with your feet about shoulder-width apart. Try to get the object between your legs, when possible, so that you don't have to reach out for it. Squat down, keeping your head up, shoulders back, and spine erect. The bending should come only from your hips, knees, and ankles. Next, get a good hold on the object, and finally, lift the object with your head up. Use your legs to lift. Your leg muscles are the biggest, strongest muscles in your body, and even though it takes more energy to use them, they can handle a lift better than your back can. Keep the object close to your body; lifting or holding an object up close to your stomach rather than at arm's length greatly reduces the stress on your back and spine. Remember that what goes up must come down, so set the object down using the same technique you used to lift it.
Use the Golfer's Lift for Light Objects

Have you ever seen a professional golfer take the ball out of the hole after a putt? Chances are, he or she didn't squat down to pick up the ball. It would be a waste of energy and just plain ridiculous to use the squat lift for such a light object. Instead, golfers use the appropriately named golfer's lift. The golfer's lift is perfect for picking up small objects off the floor without expending too much energy or straining your back. With this method, all you need is some support (a chair, a desk, or a putter) to put your hand on to take the load off of your back as you bend over.

Here is how it works. First, face the object you are going to lift, and place all of your body weight on one leg. Place the opposite hand on a support, and bend straight over from the hip; your weighted knee can bend slightly, too. Keep your head up and your spine erect in a straight line. As you bend, let the leg with no weight on it come off of the ground in line with the upper body. This leg acts as a counterbalance to the weight of the upper body, making it easier to come back up without using the muscles of the lower back, which don't have the leverage.

Besides objects on the floor, the golfer's lift works for other common situations. For example, you might be lifting a bag of groceries out of your car's trunk. Place a hand on the edge of the car, bend from the hip, grab the bag with the other hand, and lift. Again, if you let the leg without the weight come off the ground a little, you will notice how easy it is to get back upright. To make it even easier, pull the bag closer to the back of the car before lifting. Your back will not even know it's working.

Become a Crane

Sometimes you are faced with lifting an object that is too heavy for the golfer's lift, and for some reason, you cannot use the squat lift. For example, you need to remove the dirty clothes from the hamper, but the hamper is too tall to squat over, and the one-handed golfer's lift just isn't going to do the trick; you are going to have to bend over to reach down into the hamper. Or let's say you have to get a large cooler out of the trunk of your car. Ideally, you would want to use the squat lift, but the cooler is at arm's length and down below the level of the bumper; again, you are going to have to bend. You can actually bend over with very little stress to your low back if you watch your technique.
The crane lift may feel a little awkward at first, but it is a good way to lift light to moderately heavy objects that you can't get any other way. Set your feet shoulder-width apart with your knees bent slightly, and position yourself as close to over the object as you can. Bend at the hips, keeping your head up and back straight. You should feel as if you are sticking your buttocks out as you bend; this helps your spine to maintain the proper alignment. Next, grab the object and lift, keeping the object as close as you can to your stomach. Keep your head up and shoulders back as you lift. Remember to set the object back down using the same technique, and always concentrate on not twisting as you lift or lower.

In some cases, you may be able to successfully lift a heavy object, but it's carrying the object that does the damage. For a list of tactics for carrying objects, read the next section.
1. Which of the following is the most common source of low back pain?

A. A problem with the spine  
B. A problem with muscles  
C. A problem with ligaments  
D. A problem with nerves

Correct answer - B. Muscle spasms are the most common cause of low back pain. That’s why some treatments include muscle relaxers. You can strain a muscle with an unexpected pull or twist. Your risk of muscle spasms increases if you have weak stomach muscles, tight hamstrings, any back weakness, or a pelvis that tilts forward more than normal.

2. Nearly everyone has low back pain at some time during their life.

A. True  
B. False

A. True! About 80% to 90% of U.S. adults get low back pain at some point in their lives. Men and women are equally affected. Low back pain is more common as we get older, with people often having their first episode between ages 30 and 50. But it also can be the result of a sedentary lifestyle -- with too little (and occasionally too much) exercise. And low back pain is the fifth most common reason for doctor visits.

3. A week of bed rest is the best treatment for low back pain.

A. True  
B. False

B. False! Bed rest alone can actually make back pain worse. It can also lead to other conditions, like weakened muscles and blood clots in the legs. One study showed that patients who continued their normal activities after a bout of low back pain had more flexibility than those who rested in bed for a week. Staying in the same position for too long can also make your joints stiff.
4. Which of the following refers to the vertebrae in the lower back?

A. Lumbar vertebrae  
B. Thoracic vertebrae  
C. Cervical vertebrae  
D. None of the above

Correct answer is A! The lower back consists of five lumbar vertebrae. They are the weight-bearing part of the back and receive the most stress. The mid back is made up of 12 thoracic vertebrae. The ribcage attaches here. This part of the back is very flexible to allow bending and twisting. The seven cervical vertebrae are located in the neck.

5. What is the best tool for diagnosing the cause of low back pain?

A. X-Ray  
B. MRI  
C. CT scan  
D. None of the above

Correct answer is D! Most of the time, you do not need an imaging test when you have back pain, particularly because most imaging tests won't reveal a muscle spasm or ligament sprain. But your doctor may still order an imaging test if you suffered a back injury or if the pain doesn't get better after several weeks.

6. Injury to the back or a medical disorder causes most low back pain.

A. True  
B. False

Correct answer, True! Most back pain is caused by injury to the lower back or an ongoing condition. Overuse of the back muscles, sports injuries, extreme lifting, or sudden jolts -- such as a car accident -- are examples of injury. Arthritis or a bulging disc are ongoing conditions that may cause back pain. Acute – or short-term – low back pain begins suddenly and may last several days or weeks. Chronic low back pain, which can be mild or severe, lasts longer than three months.

7. How should you treat low back pain?

A. Short period of rest  
B. Ice to decrease swelling  
C. Pain medication  
D. All of the above
Correct answer, D! After the first flare-up, you might take a short rest period -- one to two days -- applying ice for the first couple of days and then a heating pad to loosen tight muscles. Take an over-the-counter pain medication if you need it. You should try to stay active as much as possible. If you do choose a day of bed rest, try to walk around every couple of hours. Movement can help speed up healing. You should see your health care provider if the pain doesn’t improve or if it gets worse within seven to 10 days.

8. A firm mattress is best for relieving back pain.

A. True
B. False

Correct answer B! Firmer may not always be better. People who sleep on a medium-firm mattress are twice as likely to report that their back pain decreased while lying in bed or getting in or out of bed. So if you think you prefer a firm mattress, you might want to try medium-firm. Softer mattresses may place less pressure on the shoulders and hips, allowing you to sleep in a more natural position on your side. Your mattress should be firm enough to maintain your spine in the position you have with good standing posture.

9. Low back pain can be treated with complementary and alternative medicine like spinal manipulation, massage therapy, and yoga.

A. True
B. False

Correct answer A! Things like chiropractic care, physical therapy, yoga, and massage may help. In fact, groups such as the American Pain Society and American College of Physicians recommend these complementary and alternative treatments for people whose pain continues after more than a few weeks of self-care.

10. What percentage of people with low back pain have a herniated disk?

A. Fewer than 2%
B. 2%-5%
C. 5%-8%
D. 8%-12%

CORRECT ANSWER A! Fewer than 2% of people with back pain have a herniated or slipped disk -- a bulging disk that presses on the nerves next to it. Most people with low back pain improve with treatment of heat and ice, rest, gentle exercise, and over-the-counter pain relievers.
Myth: Always Sit Up Straight

Okay, slouching is bad for your back. But sitting up too straight and still for long periods can also be a strain on the back. If you sit a lot, try this a few times a day: Lean back in your chair with your feet on the floor and a slight curve in your back. Even better: Try standing for part of the day, while on the phone or while reading work materials.

Myth: Don't Lift Heavy Objects

It's not necessarily how much you lift, it's how you lift. Of course you shouldn't lift anything that might be too heavy for you. When you lift, squat close to the object with your back straight and head up. Stand, using your legs to lift the load. Do not twist or bend your body while lifting or you may hurt your back.

Fact: More Pounds, More Pain

Staying fit helps prevent back pain. Back pain is most common among people who are out of shape, especially weekend warriors who engage in vigorous activity after sitting around all week. And as you might guess, obesity stresses the back.
Myth: Skinny Means Pain-Free

Anyone can get back pain. In fact, people who are too thin, such as those suffering from anorexia, an eating disorder, may suffer bone loss resulting in fractured or crushed vertebrae.

Myth: Exercise Is Bad for Back Pain

A big myth. Regular exercise prevents back pain. And for people suffering an acute injury resulting in lower back pain, doctors may recommend an exercise program that begins with gentle exercises and gradually increases in intensity. Once the acute pain subsides, an exercise regimen may help prevent future recurrence of back pain.

Fact: Chiropractic Care Can Help

The American College of Physicians and American Pain Society guidelines for treatment of lower back pain recommend that patients and doctors consider other options with proven benefits, such as spinal manipulation or massage therapy.