

BACK INJURY PREVENTION

Start Each Day with a Fit Back

Because you have a physical job, you and your back endure a schedule as tough as that of an athlete in training. Beginning each morning, you can help increase your back's stamina by stretching and warming up your muscles, exercising and using the right lifting techniques. The payoff for you is a fit back in topnotch condition – and one that won't be "sidelined" by injuries.

How Your Back Works

Your flexible back needs support throughout the day – even when you're doing something simple as brushing your teeth. Your back works best when you practice good posture, which means your back's three natural curves are lined up right. But poor posture makes your back work overtime. So, as a way to remember your posture during the day, try this: Every time you check the time, check to see if you're using good posture.

When you use **good posture**, your back is aligned in three natural curves supported by strong, flexible muscles. Good posture helps prevent back strain and pain.

With **poor posture** without support from strong, flexible muscles, your back loses its three natural curves. Poor posture can lead to pain and serious injury.

Did you know? Bending forward just a few inches almost doubles the strain on your back.

Warming Up for Work

- Low back and leg stretch – This warm-up stretches your low back and legs.
 1. Put one foot up on a chair or other support
 2. Bend forward slowly, maintaining your three natural curves
 3. Hold for a slow count of 5; repeat 5 times
 4. Switch legs

- Standing backbend – This warm-up stretches your low back.
 1. Stand with your feet apart
 2. Place your hands on the small of your back
 3. Gently arch your back, bending your head and neck backward
 4. Hold for a slow count of 5; repeat 5 times

Did you know? Most back injuries happen during the first few hours of work.

Lift Right

Lifting is athletic, and requires the right training and technique – just like a sport. Most people lift the wrong way, with their backs. But if you lift with your strong leg muscles, you can prevent back injuries and feel better, too. Lifting right can feel awkward at first, but it soon becomes a habit.

1. Get close to the load – Move so close that you feel as though you’re “hugging” the load. That puts less strain on your back.
2. Tighten your stomach muscles – But don’t hold your breath. Tightening up can work like a brace for your back, holding it in its proper position.
3. Keep your curves – It’s a good sign if you feel as though your buttocks are jutting out (just like a weight lifter’s) as you lean forward. Your three natural curves are aligned, so there’s less strain on your back.
4. Lift with your legs – You may feel tightening in your legs. That’s good: it means your legs are working hard, not your back.
5. Pivot, don’t twist – Turn with your feet, not your back, which isn’t built for twisting from side to side.

Oversized Loads

If a load is too heavy or bulky to lift alone, ask for help. Pick a person to lead the lift, so you lift, walk and lower the load together, as a team. Communicate what you intend to do, when you are going to do it and who will do what. Try to pick a person of similar height and strength as yourself.

Difficult Lifts

Some lifts are more difficult than others, but you can still adapt the steps of the ideal lift to whatever your unique lifting situation may be. Above all, remember to keep your back curves aligned, to lift with your legs and never to twist your back.

- Overhead loads – If a load is above your shoulders, adapt by using a stepstool or other sturdy object. Get as close as you can, so you’ll slide the load close to your body. Make your arms and legs do the work.

- Awkward loads – Lifting loads from underneath racks, cabinets, or other objects can be awkward. After you reach under, try to support the load on one knee. This reduces the stress on your back.

Back Exercises

- Partial sit-up – This exercise strengthens your stomach muscles. Lie on your back with both knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Slowly raise your head and shoulders off the floor, keeping your palms on the floor.
- Wall slide – This strengthens your back and leg muscles. Stand with your back against a wall and your feet slightly apart. Slide into a half-sit. Hold as long as you can; slide back up. Repeat 5 times.

Did you know? Just 10 minutes of back exercise a day could save you years of back pain.

Give Your Back a Break

After long, hard workouts, athletes need to recuperate. Your back deserves a “breather,” too, since you walk, sit or stand all day long. Some positions allow your back more rest than others. Lying on your back or side on a firm surface adds the least amount of strain to your back. Remember: If you give your back a break today, you’ll feel more refreshed tomorrow.

- On your side – When you lie on your side, bend your knees to reduce the strain on your back. And put a pillow under your head and neck to keep them level.
- On your back – A pillow under your knees helps keep your curves aligned when you’re lying on your back. Use a rolled-up towel under your neck for support.

Did you know? Lying down is less than half the strain of sitting.