

# Better Back Health

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*Careful! How you walk, sit, sleep, and move throughout the day makes a big difference in how your back feels. Learn about your back anatomy and practical ways you can improve back health.*

## How Your Back Works

The back is a complicated system that supports your body and protects the spinal cord. Muscles and ligaments attach to the backbone or spine. The back has three natural curves: the neck (cervical), the upper back (thoracic), and the lower back (lumbar). Each curve is made up of bones, called vertebrae, and pads of soft tissue, called disks. Your back's three curves need to be aligned in a balanced position. Strong muscles help your back stay aligned and balanced.

## Tips for a Healthy Back

Here are health tips you should follow daily to keep your back flexible and strong:

- Practice good posture to balance your weight and align your back.
- Breathe deeply and relax your shoulders, hips, and knees.
- Maintain an ideal weight; excess weight stresses back and stomach muscles.
- Be active; adults need 30 minutes of physical activity a day.
- Have your eyes examined regularly; a vision problem can affect your posture.
- Wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes.
- Sleep on a firm mattress to support your spine.
- Be conscious of your posture and positions, especially when lifting and bending.
- If you smoke, quit; smoking reduces blood flow to the spinal area and causes many severe health problems.
- Manage the stress and tension in your life to lessen fatigue and pain.



## Back-strengthening Movements

A strong, flexible back keeps your body healthy and prevents injury. Movement keeps the disks hydrated and healthy. Exercise strengthens muscles that support the back and help the body stay balanced. Walking is great for your back and it's as easy as taking a step out of your front door. If you have been inactive, ask your doctor for appropriate activities that will strengthen lower back and stomach muscles. If you feel pain, stop immediately.

## Tricks and Tips for Daily Tasks

Daily tasks need to be done correctly to reduce back strain.

### *Lifting*

- Test the weight to make sure it can be moved safely. Get help or use a cart if needed.
- Plan the move. Clear the path before picking up the load.
- Balance your body. Bend only the hips and knees, not the back. Squat and lift, using leg and buttock muscles.
- Bring the item close to your body.

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- Keep head and shoulders up, with the chin tucked in.
- Tighten the stomach muscles as the lift begins.
- Bend your knees, not your back. Let your leg muscles do the lifting.
- Stand up in a smooth motion without twisting.

**Bending**

- Keep the head and chest in a balanced position.
- Do not twist.
- Always avoid bending over your work; adjust work surfaces to reduce strain.

**Sitting**

- Keep both feet flat on the floor.
- Knees should be at or slightly below the level of your hips.
- The back should be firmly against the chair back.
- A lumbar support pillow or rolled-up towel can help support the lower back.

Think about your daily lifestyle. Which activities may be straining your back?

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Can you name at least three ways you can improve your back health – starting today?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Resource**

For general back health information, go to <http://familydoctor.org> or [www.healthfinder.gov](http://www.healthfinder.gov).

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## Back Health Crossword

**Down**

1. Another name for backbone.
2. Describes a mattress that supports your spine and natural curves.
3. Number of natural curves in the back.
4. Bones in the back.
5. Your body needs at least 30 minutes of this every day. (two words)
6. Habit that reduces blood flow to the spinal area.

**Across**

2. Keep these on the floor when sitting.
7. The position of your body.
8. Use these muscles when lifting.
9. Do this to strengthen back muscles.
10. Too much of this stresses back and stomach muscles.