



Back Injuries

Ever since evolution brought humans onto their feet, people have had back pains. One occupational health doctor estimates that two-thirds of industrial workers, and more than one-half of all office workers, have suffered at least one back injury by age 65.

About 85 percent of the patients this doctor sees for back problems have strained muscles in their “lumbar” region—the lower back. Lower back pain, he says, is usually set off by a specific movement at a specific moment in time. Lifting, falling, or trying to catch or break the fall of an object are the most common actions that cause such an injury. At that instant, the person may feel a snap, a popping sensation, nothing at all, or immediate agony.

Being in a hurry is a major element in back injury cases, this occupational health expert has found. If workers will take the time to get a forklift instead of trying to pick up the too-heavy object, or will get the ladder instead of just reaching for something too high, a possible injury can be avoided.

Understanding your spine can also help. The spinal column is constructed of 24 connected segments of bone and cartilage called vertebrae. It provides structural stability for the body. Spongy discs between the vertebrae cushion the bones while also bonding them together and providing the mobility that allows twisting, bending, and flexing movements. Holding the vertebrae together, too, are muscles and ligaments. Within the bone and protected by it is the spinal cord; major nerves pass through spaces between the vertebrae to this control center of the nervous system.

Back problems frequently come about when the springy disc material between the bones of the spine loses some of its bounce. This can happen simply as part of the aging process. Then, when this less-than-resilient disc is stressed by some particular movement, the disc may bulge or even break, with spongy tissue spilling out. This “herniated” disc now may press on an adjacent nerve, causing pain, numbness, tingling, or painful muscle spasm. This problem also occurs most often in the lumbar region.

Protecting your back from injury includes such precautions as:

- Lifting properly with your legs
- Sitting and standing upright without slouching
- Choosing a driving position with knees slightly bent and back arched Staying slim (for less stress on the lower back)
- Sleeping on your back, with a cushion under the knees, or on your side
- Taking breaks from any position that must be maintained for periods of time.

Good back pain prevention also includes conditioning exercise. Your goals are to improve flexibility of the back (swimming and walking are great for this) and to strengthen both back and stomach muscles, to provide proper back support.



For those who do have an injury that results in acute back pain, physicians advise: Stop. Get into bed for the first terribly painful period. You may want to use ice to reduce swelling or heat to ease muscles. Anti-inflammatory medication or muscle relaxers given to you by your doctor will help muscle spasms, too. If your mattress is too soft, add a board underneath.

Once this phase passes, in from one to five days, you should be able to move again, although in easy ways. In fact, it's important that you do begin to move at this point, to increase flexibility and strength. Allow discomfort and your good sense to tell you how far you should go.

Long-term recovery may depend on your physician's help and adhering to the preventive measures already mentioned. Doesn't this emphasize how much smarter-and more comfortable-you'll be by taking those preventive steps in the first place?

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