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# TALKING BACK

THE NEWSLETTER DEDICATED TO HEALTHY BACKS

## Your Back at Work.

Many back problems are preventable. By following some of the simple tips in this newsletter, you can help your back stay healthy, keeping you on the job! Remember that workplace safety is essential to your good health. Watch for these common causes of back and neck trouble at work:

- lifting heavy and awkward load:
- long periods of standing
- long periods of sitting
- poor posture
- poorly designed work stations
- poorly fitted chair
- computer screen at the wrong height or angle



Does your work day involve heavy or awkward lifting? Does it require long periods of sitting in front of the computer? Or hours behind the wheel? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you are at increased risk of back strain or injury, which could lead to recurring problems or pain if not managed properly. Read on for important tips to help keep your back healthy at work.

### If your job involves physical labour...

- Warm up with some stretches before you begin work. Just 5 or 10 minutes of simple movements can make all the difference to your day. Try some lunges, partial squats, toe push-ups, and knee-to-chest stretches (ask your chiropractor for some pointers). Wrap your arms around yourself and turn as far as you can one way, then the other way. With hands on your hips, bend to one side, then the other. Rotate each ankle, then each wrist. Now you're ready to start!
- Lifting can be a source of serious trouble for your back. Position the object close to your body and use your knees, and arm and leg muscles to slowly lift the object. Make sure you keep the load close to your body. Keep your back straight and be sure that the trunk of your body is pointed in the same direction as your feet (in other words, don't twist your back in relation to your feet).

### If your job means standing for most of the day...

- Take mini-breaks and move around a bit. Do some easy stretches, like bending side-to-side, stretching your arms overhead, and shaking out your legs and arms. When working, try to stand with one foot slightly raised and resting on a rail, block, or whatever makes sense in your work area and is acceptable to your supervisor or workplace safety co-ordinator.

...continued inside

# Dear Doctor

## ASK A CHIROPRACTOR

**Dear Doctor:** I am in the process of setting up a home office. I find sitting for hours in front of the computer strains my back, but I'm not sure how to make my workstation more comfortable. Can you give me some advice?

**Dear Patient:** Many people complain of back pain after long periods of sitting at work. There are ways to avoid this problem while creating a more comfortable and healthy environment in which to work. Follow these simple tips to make your home office (or any office) more back-friendly.

**Get a good chair.** You'll be spending a lot of time in your office chair, so it's worth it to invest in a good one. Ideally, you should be able to adjust the seat height, arm rests, seat pad and back to fit your body exactly. Move the height of the seat so that, with your feet flat on the floor, your knees are level with or slightly higher than your hips (use a low footrest or even a phone book if the seat won't adjust enough to give you this angle). Adjust the seat pad and chair back to fit the unique contours of your body. Fix the armrests so that they keep your elbows bent at a 90-degree angle to your body. Your arms should be at your sides, and your shoulders should be in a relaxed, natural position.

**Sit right.** Once you've created the perfect sitting arrangement, don't slip into the trap of slumping forward. Slouching will undo all your hard work adjusting that chair! To maintain the natural curve in your lower back, lean against the chair back. If you still find you need some support, put a small rolled-up towel, pillow or a lumbar support cushion in the small of your back. Reduce back pain by sitting in your chair with your buttocks aimed at where the seat and backrest meet. If your muscles ache, despite proper posture, it is time for a stretch break.

**Check your computer set-up.** It's important to arrange your computer screen and keyboard so that you don't put unnecessary strain on your joints and muscles. Place your keyboard directly in front of you. To relieve strain on your wrists, stop periodically and rest your hands in your lap. The top of your computer screen should sit at eye level, so that your neck is straight.

**Reduce eyestrain.** Eyestrain is often a source of headaches. You can reduce the risk by ensuring your workspace is well lit and that the lighting is not creating a glare on your computer screen. If the light does reflect off your computer, try an anti-glare screen or shield. A poorly lit area or screen glare can put added strain on your neck muscles as you twist and turn to see the screen better.

**Don't forget to stretch.** Take frequent stretch breaks. A good rule of thumb is to take one 5 minute stretch break every hour.



## If you spend a lot of time behind the wheel...

- Make sure the seat is far enough forward that your thighs rest comfortably on the seat while your feet are on the pedals. Sitting too far away from the pedals can strain your back as your legs reach for the pedals and your arms for the wheel.
- Your knees should be slightly bent, and level with or slightly higher than your hips.
- Your seat should be in an upright or slightly reclined position. You might want to use a back support, which should be placed with the widest part of the support between the bottom of your rib cage and your waistline.
- Adjust the headrest so that it sits directly behind your head, and no more than 2 inches from the back of your head.

**To reduce fatigue or discomfort while you're driving,** do these quick and easy exercises at stoplights, while you are struck in traffic, or at other safe opportunities:

- Open your toes as wide as you can, count to ten and close them. Repeat. Count to five while you tighten your calf muscles, then your thigh muscles, and then your buttocks. Repeat.
- Holding the steering wheel, roll your shoulders forward and backwards. Then, scrunching up your shoulders, roll them up to your ears and down again. Repeat.
- Every now and again, stop the vehicle, get out and take a stretch break. It will do wonders for your back, and help keep you alert while driving.

## Your Back at Work (cont'd. from cover)

### If you sit all day...

You may work at a desk, a computer screen, or take phone calls all day. Sounds easy on the body, but non-active or sedentary work can also take its toll. Here are some tips:

- Never cradle the phone receiver between your shoulder and neck. Hold the receiver in your hand, use a headset or use a speakerphone.
- Avoid sitting with your legs crossed at the knees. If you must, alternate sides from time to time or cross your ankles. This puts less strain on your lower back.
- Try to arrange your desk so that the items you use most frequently are closer to you or within arms reach.
- If you do a lot of computer work, centre the monitor in front of you, positioning it so that the first line of text is at eye-level. Place the keyboard directly in front of you and lay out your papers just to the side of your keyboard. Even better, put your reference material in an upright document holder, so that you don't have to constantly raise and lower your head, which may cause a tension headache. For more tips on how to set up your computer see *Ask a Chiropractor* on page 2.



## 10 TIPS FOR KEEPING YOUR BACK HEALTHY.

- 1 Exercise regularly.
- 2 Follow a healthy diet.
- 3 Maintain good posture.
- 4 Stretch your spine before and after sports.
- 5 Don't overload your backpack or shoulder bag.
- 6 Stretch your legs and back after each hour of sitting.
- 7 Never cradle the phone between your neck and shoulder.
- 8 Sleep on your back or side, not on your stomach.
- 9 Invest in a good chair, pillow and mattress. It's worth it!
- 10 Have regular spinal check-ups.

# Back to school? School your back!

Now that the kids are back to class, it's time to think about how you can help them keep their backs healthy while at school.

## TAKE A STRETCH BREAK AT YOUR DESK:

- Clench your fists and rotate them clockwise then counterclockwise 10 times.
- Place your hands in a praying position, squeeze and hold for 10 seconds. Then angle hands downward, and repeat.
- In a sitting position, put your right elbow to your left knee and hold for 10 seconds, then change sides.

Let's start with those backpacks:

- Check that the pack weighs no more than 15 percent of your child's body weight. If it is heavier, they'll lean forward to carry the full weight on their backs and shoulders, instead of having it evenly distributed.
- Purchase a backpack with wide, padded shoulder straps, and preferably a waist strap. Make sure they wear both shoulder straps. Slinging the pack on one side can cause joint and muscle strain in the neck and lower back areas.
- Adjust your child's shoulder and waist strap (if they have one) so that the pack fits snugly to the body and doesn't dangle loosely to one side.

Good posture starts at home, while doing homework, chores, and at play. Teach your children well and these tips will stay with them for life:

- Remind them to sit up tall, resting their backs against the back of their seats.
- Teach them some simple warm-up and cool-down exercises to use before and after any sports, and to stretch after sitting.
- Show them how to lift heavy objects – like gym equipment, heavy back packs, and their friends – properly by squatting down, holding the object close, and using leg and arm muscles to do the lifting.

Last but not least, help your kids take care of their bodies every day with:

- Well-balanced meals including 2 to 4 servings of milk, dairy products, or other calcium rich foods to promote strong and healthy bone growth.
- Eight glasses of water a day (five glasses for those under 12).
- Plenty of physical activity.
- A good night's sleep.



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**TREATMENT THAT STANDS UP.**