

OUCH.

MY BACK

by LISA EVANS

Back pain is one of the most common types of chronic pain out there—90 percent of us will have at least one episode of significant back pain in our lifetime, says Dr. Stephen Reed, co-author of *The Complete Doctor's Healthy Back Bible*.

The most common cause of lower back pain is a lumbar sprain, an injury to a muscle or ligament with associated inflammation. It often happens after sudden twisting or lifting, or from a repetitive motion your body isn't used to (like raking leaves or clearing snow). The pain typically shows up 24 to 48 hours later. Although usually not serious, a lumbar sprain can be intense because the nerves in the lower back are the most sensitive in our bodies and have more of a direct input into the emotional pain centres in the brain than other areas of the body, says Reed.

While back pain can strike anyone, some people are more susceptible. Poor flexibility and even body shape play a role. "Taller, thinner individuals are more prone to hamstring tightness, which puts them at greater risk of back pain," says Reed. Those who are overweight or whose muscle tone is weak from lack of exercise are also at higher risk. If you're ready to break free from the pain once and for all, follow our five simple steps.

GET UP

Bed rest weakens your muscles further because of immobility, which lengthens recovery time. Your best bet is to keep moving and perform light stretches, while avoiding aggressive movement, like lifting or bending. "After an injury, the muscles tighten up. A muscle that's shorter is weaker, so you have to stretch those tight muscles," says Chris Henderson, a Toronto-based physiotherapist.

Gentle stretches such as leg pulls and twists can help lengthen and strengthen injured back muscles. Here's one to try: While lying on your back, bring one knee into your chest, hold for five seconds, then switch sides. Advance to bringing both knees into the chest. Add a gentle twist by planting your feet on the floor and letting your knees fall to the left, then the right.

CHANGE YOUR DIET

Foods rich in omega-3s such as fish, walnuts and flaxseed can help ward off back pain by reducing inflammation. "Inflammation causes the release of substance P"—a chemical messenger—"from our nerve endings when an area is injured or inflamed. It's what creates the sensation of pain," says naturopathic doctor Penny Kendall-Reed, who co-authored *The Complete Doctor's Healthy Back Bible*. Although it's meant to be protective, so we know when to take care of smaller injuries, Kendall-Reed says it can also create too much pain in big injuries and lead to chronic pain. Ginger can help reduce pain caused by substance P if eaten or applied topically. Avoid foods that increase inflammation, such as eggplant, tomato, peppers and potatoes.

ICE FIRST, HEAT LATER

"Heat is a sign of inflammation," says Kendall-Reed. What you really need is ice, which reduces swelling and temporarily blocks pain signals. Wrap an ice pack in a towel and lay it over the painful area for 20 minutes, two to three times a day. After icing the back with this method for 48 hours, you can introduce heat into the process by alternating three minutes of heat and one minute of cold. Always end the rotation on cold. "The heat will relax the muscles and open up the blood vessels, flushing in new nutrients to the injured

area. Cold contracts the blood vessels, flushes out inflammatory by-products and decreases inflammation," says Kendall-Reed.

ADOPT A BACK-HEALTHY FITNESS ROUTINE

To prevent reoccurrence of a muscle strain, your fitness regimen should include stretches to improve flexibility, especially in the hips and hamstrings. "If these muscles are tight, you don't flex through them, you flex through your back, which causes strain," says Reed.

Core strength is also important for stabilizing the spine and reducing risk of injury. Think of your spine as a set of building blocks held together by a few ligaments. "It's inherently unstable," says Reed. To support it, you need to strengthen the surrounding muscles of the back and the stomach, especially the deeper core muscles that lie underneath the superficial abs—your six-pack. "The core muscles are a lot smaller and they connect vertebrae to vertebrae, so they act as stabilizers," says Henderson.

To activate these muscles, lie on your back with your knees bent, and as you exhale, draw your belly button toward the spine. To challenge the core, activate these muscles and add leg movement, raising and lowering one leg, then advancing to both legs at once.

To strengthen your back muscles, lie on your stomach and lift one limb at a time, holding each in the air for 10 seconds. Advance to lifting both arms, then both legs, then all four limbs at once.

KNOW WHEN TO SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION

Reed says that 90 percent of back pain improves on its own within four to six weeks, although people who experience numbness, pain radiating down one leg or difficulty urinating should seek medical attention to rule out a disc herniation. Also, people with osteoporosis or a history of cancer should check with their health care providers before initiating any self-care.

You may find benefits in working with a therapist, chiropractor, osteopath or physiotherapist. Talk to your primary care physician to find the therapeutic approach that will benefit you most. ♡

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