



By Terrie Heinrich Rizzo, MA

Oh, My Aching Back!

Do you have back problems? Over 80 percent of Americans do. By working with your trainer to develop a safe, regular exercise program, you've already taken an important step toward reducing your backache risks. You'll reduce them even more by observing a few body mechanics guidelines.

1. Eliminate Postures That Subvert Your Exercise Efforts. For example, a car seat that is set too far back can produce both a prolonged passive stretch on the hamstrings and forward arm extension, unconsciously encouraging a forward spinal curve. TV chairs that promote slouching produce similar effects. You'll undoubtedly discover other problem postures once you're on the lookout.

2. Minimize the Dangers of the Number-One Back Pain Trigger: Lifting. Use proper technique to avoid problems:

- *Consciously* tighten your abdominals to help brace your back whenever you lift.
- Split large loads into smaller ones—or get someone to help you.
- Test your load. Don't automatically grab and lift.
- Bend your knees and stick out your rear. Bent knees take pressure off your back by letting the stronger leg muscles do the work. Extending your hips relieves pressure on the lumbar discs.
- "Heads up!" Keeping your head higher than your shoulders usually prevents lifting with your back.

■ *Never* twist! Turn to face the new direction, using your feet and legs.

3. Push, Don't Pull, Whenever Possible. Pushing provides twice as much power and puts less strain on your back. Try to keep your elbows close to your body and your head up.

4. Watch How You Sit. A chair that doesn't provide proper support or a desk or keyboard that is too high can cause back problems. Make these adjustments:

■ Make sure your lower back is always supported. Either adjust the chair's lumbar support or use a wedge, a rolled-up towel or a pillow to support your lumbar curve. (Remember this for your car, too!)

■ Avoid hunching your shoulders or reaching up—your desk height should allow you to work comfortably.

■ Place your keyboard at approximately waist height. Keep your mouse (and telephone) close to avoid reaching.

■ Take frequent stretch breaks—and stand up.

■ Keep your wallet out of your back pocket! Sitting on a bulky wallet can cause or aggravate back, hip and leg pain.

5. Do Everyday Tasks With Your Back in Mind.

■ Avoid heavy shoulder bags. The weight of the average shoulder purse pulls one shoulder lower than the other, twisting the back out of alignment. Carry a handbag, or if you must use a shoulder bag, lighten it!

■ Unload groceries from your car trunk by bracing one knee on the rear bumper for support, then tightening your abdominals and removing one package at a time. Hold the bags close to your body—and don't try to overcarry.

■ When washing dishes, ironing or doing any stationary standing activity, put one foot up on a low cabinet, small stool or box. Your back and thigh form an angle of about 135 degrees, minimizing stress to the back.

■ Instead of bending over at the waist to make beds or bathe a child or pet, kneel on the floor beside the bed or tub. To reach across a bed, kneel up on the bed with one leg, keeping the other foot on the floor.

■ When standing in line, keep your legs slightly bent, your feet shoulder-width apart and one foot a few inches ahead of the other. Change positions every few minutes and don't lock your knees.

■ When gardening, observe good body mechanics for bending, lifting and moving. Choose the right tool for your job and use it properly. Long-handled tools, like rakes or shovels, are especially troublesome. Keep your feet wide and your hands apart on the handle to gain strength and leverage. When weeding, kneel and use one hand to help support your upper-body weight—or sit on a small stool. Stop frequently for stretch breaks.

6. Sleep the Right Way. The stomach is the worst sleep position because it forces the back's natural "S" curve into an arch for hours. Instead, try to sleep on your side or back. Curling on your side in a loose fetal position takes pressure off your back, especially if you support your top leg on a pillow. On your back, a pillow under your knees will comfortably preserve your spinal curve.

7. Control Your Weight. A "pot belly" is most stressful to your spine, but even 15 to 20 evenly distributed extra pounds can make your back work harder.

To keep your back healthy, the best defense is a good everyday offense combining exercise and attention to body mechanics. ■

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