



# Back to Basics

A guide to good  
back health



Workers'  
Compensation  
Board

Alberta



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# Introduction

Your back is one of the strongest parts of your body. It's always there, supporting you, every second of every day. This book was created to help you get to know your back better, to understand why back pain occurs, how to prevent it, and how to manage it. Over 80% of Albertans will experience back pain in their lives; so chances are, you're one of them. Dealing with soft-tissue back pain can be frustrating, difficult, frightening and even overwhelming. But research now indicates the most effective way to relieve back pain (and keep it from coming back) is to move; stretch, walk, swim—stay active—it doesn't matter how. We want to help you walk away from back pain—and that's what this book hopes to accomplish.

***If you're experiencing back pain—don't take it lying down.***



**Neck or cervical lordosis  
(forward curve)**

**Chest or dorsal kyphosis  
(backward curve)**

**Lower back or lumbar  
lordosis  
(forward curve)**

## Back Facts

1

**Most back problems are not due to any serious injury or disease.**

2

**Simple back strains do not cause any lasting damage.**

3

**Soft-tissue back pain is most easily, quickly and successfully treated with activity.**

A normal, healthy spine looks like a double S, with two curves in the front and one in the back. These curves are in balance and support the head on a pillar.

# Posture for Good Back Health

## Standing

Gravity is always trying to pull you down; that can result in us standing in strange ways—we'll shift our hips, lock our knees or lean against things. However, holding these postures for hours at a time can result in pain.



- Hold your body so that the top of your head, the centre of your torso and the bottoms of your feet create a straight, vertical line
- Try not to stay in any position for too long; adjust your body to prevent fatigue
- Place one foot on a 15 – 20 cm (6 – 8") elevation: a box, block, step or pile of books
- Crouch from time to time
- If you've been leaning forward, stretch and bend backwards slightly

## Sitting

Poor sitting posture is a potential problem for many of us. Poor seated posture can cause the pelvis to tilt, flattening the lower back, causing pain and discomfort.



- Supporting your feet is crucial—use a foot rest if your feet don't touch the floor, angle the rest if you're wearing high heels
- Keep your ankles in front (forward) of the knee—this helps keep your balance equal, and assists circulation in the legs
- Don't rest your feet on the spokes of the chair
- Keep a three-finger gap between the back of your knee and the edge of the chair's seat
- Knees should be at or below your hip level
- Ensure your lower back is supported in the chair; your lumbar support should rest just above the location of your hipbones when seated
- Keep your upper back supported by sitting up straight

## Sleeping

Being comfortable and supported during sleep is a crucial factor in not only your back's health, but also your overall wellbeing.



- If you experience low back pain while lying on your back, try bending your knees and supporting them with a pillow. Or, try lying on your side, knees and hips bent, with a pillow between your legs
- Try different sleeping surfaces: foam mattresses, waterbeds, memory foam—whatever can offer you a good night's sleep

## Lifting and Carrying

Follow these tips to help prevent back pain while lifting and carrying:



- Place your feet shoulder-width apart for good balance
- Bend your knees and engage your leg muscles
- Keep the load close to the centre of your body
- Lift gradually and smoothly, don't jerk—and engage your core muscles for balance and back support
- Pivot with your feet, don't twist your back while lifting
- Coordinate your lift when working with a partner

# Maintaining Good Back Health

The key to good back health, whether you're maintaining a strong back, or recovering from back pain is to get active and stay active. Building habits you can stick with for a lifetime is key. Aim for balance; exercise, sensible diet and reduced stress levels will not only help your back, but your health and wellbeing in general. Do a little more every day—and remember, it's your back, and your choice.

## Exercise

To have a healthy back, it's vital to build strong, flexible muscles that support your spinal column and maintain good posture. Daily exercise and stretching are the only ways to keep your muscles strong and your back healthy.

Regular exercise will:

- build strength and endurance
- stretch muscles and enhance flexibility
- maintain joint mobility
- increase your quality of life
- make you feel better—physically and mentally

Remember to gently warm up before doing any exercise, and breathe deeply during your activity—your muscles need oxygen.

## A Healthy Weight = A Healthy Back

Excess body weight places additional strain on your spine. A healthy lifestyle with plenty of physical activity, balanced food and proper stress management can significantly improve not only your back health, but also your overall quality of life. Talking to your doctor about changing your eating habits is a great start. And remember, it's about making changes that you can keep for a lifetime; this is your health, your back and your choice!

### Simple Ways to Get Active:



- Walk. It doesn't matter where. Once around the living room, once around the block—it's all beneficial to your back's health and recovery. Expand your route as you go, walk further every time.
- Go indoors for inclement weather. Mall walking is great for hot summer days and cold winter nights, with the added benefit that many malls have walking clubs!
- Take the kids to the park; fly a kite, have a picnic, get out there!
- Swimming is fantastic. With little impact on joints, and your body's weight supported by the water, it's a relaxing, safe way to get your back into shape.
- Hop on the exercise bike, and watch your favourite tv program.
- Try a dancing class with your partner—get fit and spend time together!

## Keep Up Your Spirits

A healthy lifestyle is more than just eating right and getting exercise. Your mental health is a vital part of physical wellbeing and your overall quality of life. Dealing with everyday stress in productive ways and keeping a positive outlook will help keep you feeling great. Take care of yourself, take time for fun, and remember, laughter is a great tool for stress relief.

# Pain

Dealing with pain is often difficult. But there are some simple ways to handle pain that will help keep you active, and keep the pain from coming back.

## Heat and Cold

Heat and cold can be used for short-term pain relief and to relax muscle tension. Best used in the first 48 hours, try both and decide which works best for you; either a hot-water bottle, bath or shower, or perhaps a bag of ice, frozen peas, or ice-pack on the sore area for 5 – 10 minutes at a time.

## Pain Killers

Pain killers such as Acetaminophen, Aspirin and ibuprofen are often the most effective. Using pain killers can help you overcome the initial back pain, so you can get active and help your muscles heal. Remember to take the recommended dose, at the recommended interval so you keep your pain under control—don't let it control you.

*(Do not take Aspirin or ibuprofen if you are pregnant, have asthma, indigestion or an ulcer.)*

## Alternative Therapy

There are many alternative therapies to help you manage your pain. Yoga, and acupuncture are two possibilities. Depending on your injury and circumstances, you may wish to pursue these alternatives to get you back on your feet. Just remember, talk to your doctor before beginning anything new.



**Stay Positive:** stress can aggravate or prolong pain. You cannot always avoid stress, but you can reduce its effects by controlled breathing, muscle relaxation and calming techniques. A great way to reduce stress or tension is exercise.

## Recovering from Back Pain

The first thing to remember is you're not alone. There are numerous resources and support systems available to you, all wanting to help you get moving and get better. Friends, family, your employer, WCB—we all want to see you walk away from back pain.

Back pain can be frightening, frustrating and disheartening. But keep in mind that most back pain is not due to any serious disease, and with physical activity, most back pain is greatly reduced—sometimes eliminated completely.

And don't fall into the trap of thinking it'll be easier if you put it off; your muscles need movement and exercise to remain strong and healthy. The faster you get active and get moving, the faster you'll be able to walk away from back pain.

## When to see a doctor



Though you can deal with most back pain yourself, sometimes you just want to be sure. This is totally normal. Doctors can reassure you about your pain and help suggest ways to deal with it. Just remember there is no quick fix for back pain.

Consult your doctor if you experience severe pain that gets worse over several weeks, instead of improving, or if your back pain makes you seriously unwell.

***But remember, back pain is rarely due to any serious disease.***



# It's Your Back, Your Health, and Your Choice

Your back supports you throughout your entire life, so it's easy to see how important a healthy back is, not only for your work and livelihood, but for your overall quality of life! It's the simple changes, made every day that are going to make the difference. You don't have to be superhuman, run marathons or stop eating your favourite foods. Strive for healthy, balanced choices that improve your health now, and keep you healthy in the future. Keep it simple, keep it fun and keep moving! We want to help you walk away from back pain; and don't forget—it's your life—and your choice.

Rest	vs.	Activity
You get stiff		<b>Keeps you supple and flexible</b>
Muscles get weak		<b>Develops muscles</b>
Bones get weak		<b>Strengthens your bones</b>
You lose fitness		<b>You gain fitness</b>
You get depressed		<b>You feel good</b>
Pain may increase		<b>Releases natural chemicals that reduce pain</b>
It is harder to get back at it		<b>Keeps you in the game</b>

# Information Sources

*The Back Book*  
Norwich: TSO, 2002

*Back to Basics*  
Edmonton: WCB-Alberta, 1999

[www.spine-health.com](http://www.spine-health.com)





**BACKPAIN** > DON'T TAKE IT  
LYING DOWN

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