



## Healthy Lifestyle

# Adult health

**Heavy lifting, repetitive movements and sitting at a desk all day can take a toll on your back. Get the facts about back pain at work and how to prevent it.**

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Whether it's dull and achy or sharp and stabbing, back pain can make it hard to concentrate on your job. Unfortunately, many occupations — such as nursing, construction and factory work — can place significant demands on your back. Even routine office work can cause or worsen back pain. Understand what causes back pain at work and what you can do to prevent it.

A number of factors can contribute to back pain at work. For example:

- **Force.** Exerting too much force on your back — such as by lifting or moving heavy objects — can cause injury.
- **Repetition.** Repeating certain movements, especially those that involve twisting or rotating your spine, can injure your back.
- **Inactivity.** An inactive job or a desk job can contribute to back pain, especially if you have poor posture or sit all day in a chair with inadequate back support.

Of course, factors such as aging, obesity and poor physical condition also can contribute to back pain. While you can't control your age, you can focus on maintaining a healthy weight, which minimizes stress on your back.

Start by eating a healthy diet. Make sure you get enough calcium and vitamin D. These nutrients can help prevent osteoporosis, a condition that causes your bones to become weak and brittle and is responsible for many of the bone fractures that lead to back pain.

Combine aerobic exercise, such as swimming or walking, with exercises that strengthen and stretch your back muscles and abdomen. Exercises that increase your balance and strength can also decrease your risk of falling and injuring your back. Consider tai chi, yoga and weight-bearing exercises that challenge your balance.

For most healthy adults, the Department of Health and Human Services recommends at least 150 minutes a week of moderate aerobic activity or 75 minutes a week of vigorous aerobic activity — preferably spread throughout the week — and strength training exercises at least twice a week.

Also, if you smoke, quit. Smoking reduces blood flow to your lower spine, which can contribute to spinal disc degeneration and slow healing from back injuries. Coughing associated with smoking can also cause back pain.

You can take steps to avoid and prevent back pain and injuries at work. For example:

- **Pay attention to posture.** When standing, balance your weight evenly on your feet. Don't slouch. To promote good posture when sitting, choose a chair that supports your spinal curves. Adjust the height of your chair so that your feet rest flat on the floor or on a footrest and your thighs are parallel to the floor. Remove your wallet or cellphone from your back pocket when sitting to prevent putting extra pressure on your buttocks or lower back.
- **Lift properly.** When lifting and carrying a heavy object, lift with your legs and tighten your core muscles. Hold the object close to your body. Maintain the natural curve of your back. Don't twist when lifting. If an object is too heavy

to lift safely, ask someone to help you.

- **Modify repetitive tasks.** Use lifting devices, when available, to help you lift loads. Try to alternate physically demanding tasks with less demanding ones. If you work at a computer, make sure that your monitor, keyboard, mouse and chair are positioned properly. If you frequently talk on the phone and type or write at the same time, place your phone on speaker or use a headset. Avoid unnecessary bending, twisting and reaching. Limit the time you spend carrying heavy briefcases, purses and bags.
- **Listen to your body.** If you must sit for a prolonged period, change your position often. Periodically walk around and gently stretch your muscles to relieve tension.

Back pain can plague your workdays and free time. You're not stuck with it, though. Examine your work environment and address situations that might aggravate your back. Even simple steps to ease back pain are steps in the right direction.

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