

Stress and Back Pain

Lifting is not the only kind of stress that can hurt your back. Mental or emotional stress can be just as damaging, and many people encounter stressful situations daily. In the short term, the tension created by emotional stress can give you a backache; in the long term, it can set you up for a serious back injury, among other, more life-threatening health problems.

Recognize Your Stress

Many people hold emotional stress in their muscles, especially the muscles of the neck and shoulders. You might know this stress as a tension headache that starts in the back of your neck and moves up and down from there. A bad day at work or an upcoming job interview can bring on that creeping tightness.

What actually causes the pain? Well, normally, blood flows through the muscles of your neck and back with very little resistance. However, when you are emotionally stressed, certain muscles may tense up and squeeze these blood vessels. Like a garden hose with a kink in it, the flow of blood can get constricted or even cut off by these tense muscles. When your neck and back are not getting their proper blood supply, they let you know it with pain.

In addition to the temporary discomfort, more serious consequences can result from this stress-related tension. Because the blood carries the nutrients and oxygen that muscles need to function, a reduction in the blood flow can cause the muscles to weaken. They are, in effect, losing their fuel supply, and as mentioned previously, weak muscles are very susceptible to strain and injury. Learn to recognize when your mood and stress level are affecting your physical condition. When you feel that tension, be prudent - don't decide to rearrange your furniture that day.

Learn to Relieve Stress

After you recognize the emotional stress in your life, how can you deal with it? There are many ways. Try to identify the people and situations that tend to bother you. Maybe you can avoid some of them altogether -- that would be the best medicine. In reality, though, some situations and people cannot be avoided, such as rush-hour traffic, deadlines at work, or an unyielding boss. Some anxiety is just part of everyday life.

The next best thing to total avoidance is learning to anticipate these situations ahead of time and making the conscious decision not to let them get to you. You might want to plan a way to make the situation easier on yourself. For example, if you must go to the grocery store at peak hours, accept the fact that there will be long checkout lines, and plan a diversion for yourself; bring a book to read. If you just can't stand battling rush-hour traffic, plan to work out at the gym for an hour after work. You avoid the traffic, relax your mind, and feed your back all at the same time.



Visualization is one way to melt away stress.

You might want to try cutting down on some of the habits that can aggravate your already stressed out condition. Caffeine and nicotine can have the effect of creating a sense of anxiety even when you aren't anxious about anything. Cutting down your intake of stimulants may help reduce your stress level.

Of course, there is always the old stand-by method for melting away stress. Find a quiet place to get away; close your eyes; listen to some relaxing music; breathe slowly and deeply; and imagine yourself at the beach, with warm sand, lapping waves, and a gentle breeze. Sounds nice, doesn't it?

As you can see, there are almost as many ways to prevent back pain as there are bad behaviors that cause it. If you make these suggestions part of your everyday routine, your back should be strong and healthy.