

# Breathe Easy Therapies

## Lifestyle Tips for Today – 10 Important Tips for Back Pain

It is a startling fact that back pain affects around 80% of the population in industrial countries and indications are that it is on the increase.

The human body evolved over thousands of years to be capable of upright stance and mobility. It developed at a time of daily physical exertions in building shelters, hunting animals for meat, climbing trees for fruit, walking long distances for water, etc. All work was done by hand, not by machines. Our predecessors were physically active and strong and they would have used a full range of movement of each joint.

We know these things from studying fossils and comparing these to primitive tribes in our modern world. Although such people may be primitive in our eyes, they have exceedingly low incidence of back pain and their lumbar curve is less pronounced than in Western populations. These people tend to squat rather than sit, stretching their lower back and leg muscles.

It would seem that in our quest for civilisation and automation, we have engineered ourselves into developing back problems. Even our smallest form of exercise has been engineered away, that of changing the TV station. Sitcoms have made fun of this in showing people searching the whole lounge room, looking under the sofa, behind the cushions, in the cupboard just so that they can then sit back down in the chair and change channels with their remote control.

Technology has brought many benefits to us but at what cost? Many of us take the car around to the corner shop to pick up the paper. We sit (and slouch) at our desks for hours on end each day; we even hire people to walk our dogs.

We have become progressively more inactive as a race and this is reflected in the increasing obesity rates. Admittedly, the preponderance of convenience food high in either fat or sugar or both helps fuel our weight problem.

In short, we are less active, our range of movement is lower and our diet is worse than the people that lived in the time that our body evolved. We have failed to adapt sufficiently to the changes in our modern lives and we are now suffering the consequences.

On the bright side, there are many things that we can do to help ourselves prevent or overcome back pain. Here are 10 tips to help you cope better with back pains.

### **1) Get it checked out**

Back pain can come from causes other than tight muscles. Vertebral misalignment, bulging discs and even kidney problems can all manifest as back pain. If your back pain is unexpected or unusual, it is strongly advised that you get it checked out with your doctor before choosing to see a natural therapist.

Seeking natural health care for what you think is a back pain of muscular or joint origin when the actual cause is a kidney infection for example will only delay treatment and possibly make matters worse.

### **2) Prevention**

The best way to deal with back pain is to prevent it in the first place. Regular stretching is the single most effective method of preventing back pain in later life.

Being flexible is particularly important in the care of your back. The human frame is built to perform in a certain way, but the soft tissue structures viz: muscles, tendons, ligaments etc. will become shortened when their potential range is not realised or maintained.

We unconsciously train our muscles to shorten through prolonged sitting for example. In this instance, the iliopsoas muscle that attaches to the lumbar spine and to the front of the top of the femur becomes shortened. Standing straight for extended periods and/or lying on your back with your legs straight will become painful in the lower back.

Everybody, regardless of age or stiffness, can learn to stretch. There is a stretch that is useful for each muscle group. For those who are particularly stiff and inflexible, there are safe ways of performing each stretch. This is important to prevent injury. Sudden jerking movement into pain is not only ineffective but may seriously damage tissue.

When stretching, position yourself where tension is felt and hold for a minimum of ten seconds to allow muscles, tendons & ligaments adjust to the new position. It is important to go to the point of mild tension. As the tissues adjust, the tension will subside. If it doesn't, ease off the stretch to where tension is comfortable. This is the easy stretch.

When the tension has eased, slowly move further into the functional stretch where tension is felt again. It is this phase of the stretch that increases flexibility.

Your breathing throughout the stretching exercise should be slow, rhythmical and controlled.

Never, ever bounce or move sharply into a stretch.

### **3) Shed those extra kilos**

Being overweight puts extra strain on your muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints. Over time, the joints may wear, eventually causing pain.

The more weight you carry, increasingly robs you of your range of movement at each joint.

There are many weight loss programs on the market; from those where you buy low calorie meals to meal replacement shakes to the so-called fad diets such as the Atkins. All diets you may undertake have value for you under certain circumstances. It is important that you look at your individual situation before embarking on a particular diet.

Whatever diet you choose, there are a few important things to bear in mind.

Firstly, make sure that the program you choose will do you no harm. There have been a lot of positive accolades for the Atkins diet but there have also been a number of scientific studies showing how it can cause you problems later on.

Secondly, make sure that you are getting all the nutrients that you need. Cutting back or eliminating certain foods can mean that you also cut out nutrients that cannot be made by the body, essential fatty acids for example.

Thirdly, some diet products aren't all that they make out to be. Be very wary when buying low fat foods at the supermarket. If the manufacturer had simply reduced the fat content, then the product would probably be a failure.

Lowering fat also means lowering the satisfaction value of the food as well as what is called "mouth-feel". To compensate, the food is loaded with simple carbohydrates and chemicals to help give back the satisfaction to the stomach and the mouth.

And lastly, sometimes diet alone is not enough. Exercise is an essential part of a diet regime. The amount of weight that you gain or lose is directly related to the difference in the number of calories (kilojoules) that you eat as opposed to those that you burn.

Exercise is also good for you. As well as burning up the calories, it also burns up stress hormones causes the release of endorphins. This will leave you feeling less stressed and feeling good about yourself.

#### **4) Increase the strength of your stomach muscles**

Work on increasing your abdominal strength. Strong stomach muscles help to support the back.

The abdominal cavity is like a balloon. When you increase pressure by tightening your stomach muscles, you stand up straighter. Conversely, if your stomach muscles are weak, this pressure can't be maintained and you will slouch forward.

The best way of strengthening the stomach muscles (and to help reduce the bulge) is to do crunches. Whilst sit-up's help, they strengthen the iliopsoas muscle rather than the abdominals.

Crunches are where you lay on your back on the floor with your legs bent at the knees, feet on the floor. That is the easy part. The hard bit is where you lift your shoulders about 10 - 15cm off the floor and hold them up for up to 10 seconds before lowering them again. This is repeated several times to complete a "set".

These can be daunting if you haven't done them before or if you haven't tried them for a while. The best way is to start slowly and build up your routine. It is more important to establish a small routine that is easy to maintain than to be over ambitious and stop because it is too hard.

#### **5) Improve your posture**

Good posture is any position that allows you to do whatever work you need to do that is comfortable for as long as the position is held. Even though bad posture may not cause any discomfort, continual poor posture will cause back pain in the long-term.

The curve (or "small") of the back is just above the hips and is formed in part by the action of the iliopsoas muscle on the lumbar vertebrae. When standing, this curve is naturally present and varies from person to person. The curve is normally inwards and can be altered by changing the tilt of the pelvis. A marked increase in the curve for a prolonged time or more frequently for shorter times causes pain as the ligaments and muscles around the vertebrae are stretched.

For many of us, our lifestyle is not conducive to maintaining good posture. Sometimes our joints are not adequately flexible and our contralateral muscle strength is not in balance.

The best posture we can hope for in the standing position is where the ear is over the shoulder, hip, and ankle. Most of us cannot achieve this alignment mainly because of tight muscle groups such as the hamstrings and/or because of a tight thoracic/lumbar spine coupled with weak tummy muscles.

One way of achieving this ideal posture is to imagine a string coming out of the top of your head and that the string is being pulled directly upwards.

Your body will move into a position of good posture as the imaginary string is pulled. You should find that your chin lifts, your shoulders move back and your chest moves forward slightly as the slouch in your upper back reduces. Your stance will feel more "open" rather than the "closed" stance that a slouch encourages.

## **6) Get more exercise**

The function of the curves of the spine is to help us maintain balance and to facilitate mobility. They are not structured to be load bearing. The best exercise to ensure they function well is long stride walking, making sure to straighten each knee as the opposite leg moves forward.

Walking, as well as improving cardiorespiratory fitness, will keep the intervertebral discs in good shape. These discs have no blood supply of their own and rely on fluids moving in and out of them to provide nutrients. Walking provides the ideal pulsing pressure to facilitate this nutrient flow.

Regular exercise should become a way of life. Whether this is walking to the park once a day or a visit to the gym, regular exercise not only keeps your body fit, it keeps you flexible too.

Weight bearing exercise also improves bone mass and is a good preventative measure for osteoporosis. Weights can also be used as part of a remedial treatment for osteoporosis but in this case, the weights need to be started low and exercises carried out slowly at first to prevent injury.

## **7) Seated posture**

You should endeavour to make these suggestions a welcome part of your daily life, as they will provide you with the foundation of a healthy back. This is especially true if your daily tasks tend to be mainly sedentary in nature.

Sit with your knees higher than your hips. If necessary, use a small stool to raise your feet. This ensures that the spine is in the optimum position, encouraging the correct curvature. It also eases the pressure on your lower spine.

Sit in a chair that has proper support for your lower back. A chair with a built-in lumbar support is ideal. If you don't have one, then place a small cushion in the small of your back for support. You will find this to be more comfortable than without over extended periods. A saddle or kneeling chair is also good for the posture as they encourage you to sit up straight.

Choose a chair with arm rests that are not too high or not too low.

Posture and sitting position are very important when working at a desk or table. Always ensure that:

- You have a chair of correct height that supports your lower back. The best seat height allows your elbows to be about one inch above your desk.
- Reading stands or monitors are flexible and adjustable, so that you do not have to bend over your desk or table. These should be at eye level. If you need to look up or down, they encourage you to move your head to view them. This can lead to shoulder or neck pain.

### **When driving**

If your car seat is too deep (from front to back) and the back of the seat does not support you properly, fill the space with a small cushion. Seated properly, your knees should be higher than your hips – if this is not so, adjust the seat forward and adjust the height of your seat if possible. Again, if this is not possible, then for comfort's sake place a small cushion under your thighs.

If you are regularly going on long journeys it helps to stop and take a little exercise to relieve the stress of prolonged sitting. It also helps to prevent you from becoming drowsy. When getting out of the car, swivel your whole body towards the door. Slide your feet onto the ground and stand up.

### **8) Lift properly**

Always follow these basic principles when lifting regardless of whether the object is heavy or light:

- Assess the task at hand
- Place your feet shoulder width apart for a broad, stable base
- Bend the knees
- Keep your back straight, though not necessarily vertical
- Get a firm grip, palms inward
- Ensure your arms are in line with your trunk
- Lift with the weight close to the centre of gravity
- Point your feet in the direction of movement

Breathe Easy Therapies  
12 Porter Street  
Point Vernon. QLD 4655  
Phone 4128 4331

[www.breatheeasy.com.au](http://www.breatheeasy.com.au)  
[stewart@breatheeasy.com.au](mailto:stewart@breatheeasy.com.au)  
[susan@breatheeasy.com.au](mailto:susan@breatheeasy.com.au)

If the load is too heavy – get some help or use a mechanical aid e.g. a trolley.

If a heavy load cannot be divided, hold it close to the body with a firm grip in both hands.

Make sure that you can see over the load so that you don't trip.

### **Carrying**

Use the same principles for carrying as you would for lifting but also remember that if you have a load to carry, balance your body by Carrying two small loads rather than one large one, for example, always carry two small shopping bags rather than one large heavy bag.

### **9) Reduce your daily stress**

Backache can sometimes be aggravated by emotional problems. Because of the interaction between mind and body, we need to be aware of the role of our emotions in the health of our backs.

Many back problems are the result of, or made worse by, chronic daily stress. Under prolonged stress the body gives way eventually and the stress earns a new label – "back problem".

With depression, worry, anxiety, discontentment or unhappiness, normal aches and pains or unpleasant sensations become more obvious. Minor discomforts now become back pain.

Stress – one of the side effects of stress is increased muscle tension, which can lead to fatigue, stiffness and localised pain. Constantly tight muscles can create postural imbalances that may cause misalignment of the spine.

### **10) Schoolbags**

Most children carry their schoolbags incorrectly. Carrying a heavy load incorrectly adds extra strain to the back and may result in back pain in later life.

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Phone 4128 4331

[www.breatheeasy.com.au](http://www.breatheeasy.com.au)  
[stewart@breatheeasy.com.au](mailto:stewart@breatheeasy.com.au)  
[susan@breatheeasy.com.au](mailto:susan@breatheeasy.com.au)

The difficulty is explaining to a young adult that they aren't invulnerable and that one day they may suffer the consequences of following a trend today.

The aim when carrying a heavy bag is to achieve balance across the shoulders and hips. This means that the child's posture is distorted as little as possible and the load is distributed equally.

- A well fitting backpack/rucksack with hip straps is ideally suited for carrying the heaviest load.
- Rucksacks and backpacks should be worn over both shoulders with hip straps closed around the waist.
- Rather than one very heavy bag with one hand, children should aim to carry two smaller loads – one in each hand.

Want to find out more?.....

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12 Porter Street  
Point Vernon. QLD 4655  
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[www.breatheeasy.com.au](http://www.breatheeasy.com.au)  
[stewart@breatheeasy.com.au](mailto:stewart@breatheeasy.com.au)  
[susan@breatheeasy.com.au](mailto:susan@breatheeasy.com.au)