Five star chiropractor

offers

8 best self-care tips for the health of your spine

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Back and neck pain (along with associated symptoms such as headache, pinched nerves, sciatica, and more) are among the most common afflictions of humans.

In fact, nearly everyone will experience back or neck pain at one time or another. And, unfortunately, for many of those with spinal pain, the problem becomes chronic - embedded into their system over the long term.

There are many treatment approaches that doctors use to help those suffering from spinal pain. Among these, manual therapy — hands-on treatment as performed by a skilled doctor of chiropractic - consistently stands out in research as the safest and most effective, with high patient satisfaction.

Nonetheless, the golden path over the long term for those with spinal problems is ***self-care*** to enhance the resilience of the spine and prevent recurrence.

Over my many years of practice (42 as of 2023!) I've explored many of these self-care ideas and shared many with my patients. I've been on the lookout for ideas that are the easiest to implement and work the best.

You don't have to make use of all of these suggestions. But don't pick just one and hope it will make a difference. Spinal pain is a complex problem that requires a multi-pronged approach. So find two or three (or more) of these ideas that work within your lifestyle and implement them consistently.

They'll make a difference!

1. Refresh your relationship with your chair

Prolonged sitting is one of the worst things for your spine. Here are three self-care strategies:

A. Get out of your chair every 20 minutes. Set an alarm on your phone or computer to alert you when the 20 minutes is up. Move around. Perform a few deep squats - this is good for your low back, and boosts your metabolism too.

B. Change the pitch angle of your seat. If your seat is horizontal (and especially if it's pitched backwards) it's easy to slump forward over your work. Instead, tilt your chair forward (if it adjusts that way) or use a rolled up towel or small cushion under your sit bones at the back of your chair. That way you'll be perched forward instead of slumped forward.

Here's more info.

C. If you work on a flat desk surface, don't hunch forward over your work, which will round your upper back and put a strain on your neck. Instead, find a slanted board (or use a board with its back end placed over a couple of books) so that your work is at an angle. This will allow your head and neck to remain in a more balanced posture.

D. Practice some of the sitting positions that don't use a chair: squatting, kneeling, sitting with legs spread apart, and sitting with legs crossed. They might feel uncomfortable at first, so try them out for as little as 30 seconds at a time if that's all you can manage. You'll gradually be able to build your comfort with them and incorporate them into your daily life.

2. Get a good night's sleep

If you're missing out on restful sleep, your back will pay the price.

Here are some self-care tips:

A. Leave adequate time for sleeping. Allow an interval of 8 hours devoted to sleeping (or at least 7 if that's all you can manage.)

B. Avoid a chilling breeze passing over your body. Some of the worst cases I see of a stiff neck occur in the fall (on one of the first few cool nights when someone has left their window open) or in late spring (the first night they've cranked their air conditioner on) due to exposure to a chilling breeze. Your muscles will clamp right up and give you a stiff creaky neck in the morning.

C. (This sounds contradictory, but it isn't really….) Keep your room cool. People typically sleep best when the air temperature is around 65°. It's okay to use a blanket, though. The air you're breathing will be cool while your muscles will stay warm.

D. Use a mattress that combines local cushiness with global firmness.

   Patients often ask my opinion about using a firm mattress versus a soft mattress. The answer is - both! Your mattress should be able to conform locally to a heavier body part — softly cradle your hip bone, for instance — without overall sagging, which would distort your spinal alignment. A memory-foam type mattress is designed for this dual-identity form of support, but a conventional inner-spring mattress with a pillow top could offer similar performance.

   Here's more info.

E. Use a pillow that can adapt its shape to cradle your head when you're lying on your back, but fill in the gap of the width of your shoulders when you're lying on your side, so that your head doesn't sag. A traditional feather pillow can shape itself in this way, but there are other types of pillow design that will also perform both of these roles.

   Here's more info.

F. Sleeping face down is the most challenging for your spine. Apart from the possibility of your low back sagging, if you lie face down you have to turn your head all the way to the side. Your neck is designed to turn that way, but it's not designed to turn all the way to one side and stay there hour after hour.

G. If you're a confirmed front-sleeper, the least you can do is try a full-length body pillow. If you hug the pillow alongside your body, you can lie at an angle half-way between face down and side-lying.

H. Avoid staring at a screen for 30 minutes or more before bedtime.

I. Melatonin? There's some controversy about whether melatonin actually works as a sleep aid. Some say it does, some say it doesn't. Some say it helps you stay asleep once you've conked out, but it won't help you fall asleep in the first place. Some people say it helps, but only for older people. Try it if you wish.

3. Exercise your abdominal muscles properly

The surface layer of the abdominal muscles - the rectus abdominis - doesn't come into play to support posture or protect your low back. It's designed to flex your trunk. That means it tucks in your tailbone (i.e. tilts the sacrum backward) and flattens the curve of your low back.

Instead, for postural support, to take pressure off your discs, and to protect the health of your low back, you need to activate the deeper-lying abdominal muscles - the obliques and transversus.

Here's how you can practice distinguishing the difference between these muscles layers.

Lie on your back and place your hand over your belly. If you fire off your superficial muscle, the rectus abdominis, the muscle will bunch up and your hand will rise further from the floor.

Instead, if you fire off your deeper muscles, they'll draw the abdominal wall inward and your hand will sink toward the floor.

Here are two exercises that target these deeper-lying muscles for optimal abdominal strengthening:

A. The plank pose

Hold for 45 seconds. If that's too hard, you can stop and rest, then restart the pose as long as your total hold time adds up to 45 seconds.

B. Straight leg raise

Lie on your back with the left knee bent and the left foot on the floor. The right leg stays long. Then simply lift the right leg two inches off the floor and hold the position for 45 seconds, feeling the abdominal wall flattening and being drawn in. Don't press your low back against the floor - just allow it to maintain whatever natural curve it already has.

Repeat on the other side.

Like the plank pose, if it's too hard, you can stop and rest, then restart the pose until your total hold time adds up to 45 seconds.

On the other hand, if this exercise doesn't challenge your abdominal muscles sufficiently, there are a few ways to make it harder.

a. Lift both arms over your head while you hold. (But don't allow the lower ribs to hike up!)

b. Hold 5 or 10 pound weights in each hand as your hold your hands over head.

c. You can also try flexing your left thigh in towards your body while you lift the straight right leg. That's pretty hard to do! Make sure you don't scrunch up your abdominal wall while you're doing it. If you can't do it with proper form, just do an easier version until you develop more strength.

Here's more info.

4. Two types of low back support and why you might need them

Braces and supports have a role to play in recovery from low back pain and preventing its recurrence.

For those with low back problems, there are two major types of supports that could be useful.

A. Lumbosacral support

One type of brace cinches you tightly around the waist, sucking in your abdominal wall, and supplementing the role of your deeper-lying abdominal muscles in supporting the lumbar spine. Here's an example of a simple version. There are many other variations available too.

This type of brace is called a lumbar brace, lumbar support, or a lumbosacral brace. You might benefit from this type of brace if you have problems with the intervertebral discs, or, more generally, if you have midline low back pain, or sciatic pain spreading down the leg into the calf or foot.

B. Trochanter (or sacroiliac) belt

The other type of support is a sacroiliac belt or trochanter belt. It's thinner, and you wear it lower down, around the widest parts of your hips.

You might benefit from this type of support if you have **sacroiliac pain**, buttock pain, or pain in the region of the trochanter (the outer part of the thigh bone, usually called the “hip.”) Here’s an example:

Some physicians steer away from the use of supports because they fear that using them will substitute for the patient's own muscle activation, and in the long run lead to muscle weakness. I don't think that's often a problem. First of all, the use of the brace doesn't stop you from using your own muscles. And also, you don't necessarily have to wear the brace 24 hours a day. If you wear a lumbosacral support for 6 hours a day, for instance, you've just spared your lumbar discs from 6 hours of wear and tear. That will help in your recovery.

If you think one of these supports will help you, there's probably little risk in trying one of them out and assessing the benefit for yourself. But to find the optimal approach to your own self-care, you'll need your musculoskeletal system fully evaluated. That's my job - call or e-mail me for an appointment.

5. Gels, rubs, patches and poultices: topical products that might help with back pain

There are a variety of patches, creams and gels available for those with back pain.

Here is an outline of six different kinds of topical back pain products (five of them available without a prescription), their mode of action, and the likelihood that they could work for you.

1. Counterirritants

Counterirritants are substances such as menthol, camphor, or wintergreen oil that create a stinging, burning, or “icy hot” sensation. The theory is that the burning sensation overrides the noxious pain signals going into your brain, thus alleviating pain.

These products are likely to be safe. You may get some skin reddening, though it’s probably just temporary. Any relief you get is probably temporary, too.

2. Capsaicin

Capsaicin is the active ingredient that makes hot peppers hot. If you rub it on your skin, it will produce a burning sensation. In some respects, this will work similarly to the counterirritants described above. But there's more.

Once capsaicin is absorbed into the skin, the theory is that it inhibits the nerve transmitters that your body uses to signal pain. So its effect may be more substantial than the effect of other counterirritants.

Don't expect pain relief right away; it might take a week or two of consistent use for the benefits to kick in.

3. Salicylates

Salicylate is the active ingredient in aspirin. Aspirin is a proven anti-inflammatory and pain reliever, but it can chew up your stomach lining. As an alternative, you can find gels or patches containing salicylate so that it's absorbed directly into your skin.

The advantage of using a salicylate-containing cream or patch is that you can get an effective dose in the painful area with a far lower system-wide load. Here's some **research** that backs up this method.

4. Herbs for pain

A number of different herbs have pain-relieving, muscle-relaxing, or circulation-boosting properties.

One example is comfrey root. Researchers have shown that applying **comfrey root** to your low back affords rapid pain relief.

Another herb, ilea, is also used in a number of topical back-pain formulas.

"Chinese" herbs

A wide variety of herbs are used topically in traditional Chinese medicine to address back pain.

The choice of herbs to be used depends on a traditional Chinese medical evaluation of the nature and underlying cause of your problem. Different people with back pain could have quite different “diagnoses” from the Chinese medical point of view and be prescribed different herbs.

However, if you want to try some of these remedies without the benefit of a Chinese medical evaluation, some of the herbs that might be suggested in one case or another include dipsacus, eucommia, and psoralea.

5. Homeopathic preparations

The underlying theory of homeopathy, that vanishingly minute amounts of the right ingredients can spur your body toward health, is so scientifically unlikely that I can’t recommend the use of a homeopathic product.

I’m all in favor of the “spur your body toward health” part of the philosophy, but the “vanishingly minute amount” ends up meaning that homeopathically-prepared remedies contain absolutely zero of the supposedly active ingredient. That strains my credulity.

Besides which, I’m not aware of any research evidence that homeopathic treatment is effective for any condition.

That being said, if you’ve tried a homeopathic type of product and it seems to work for you — great!

6. Prescription topicals

Allopathic physicians can prescribe pain patches containing lidocaine, a cocaine analog that alleviates pain.

6. Eat right to control inflammation

Taking care of your spine is partly about the “biomechanics” of your posture, alignment, and muscle strength — keeping the joints limber and balanced, and ensuring adequate muscle control for action.

But taking care of your spine also means making sure your body isn't prone to inflammation. A general metabolic tendency to inflammation will predispose your spine to arthritis.

That's where diet and nutritional supplementation come in.

Foods that will make inflammation worse include:

- Sugar
- Simple carbohydrates found in white flour, bread, or pasta
- Meat that's grain-fed
- Vegetable oils such as corn oil, sunflower oil, safflower oil, soy oil, and others.

Foods that will tame inflammation include:

- Dark green veggies such as kale, spinach, broccoli, and more
- Brightly-colored fruits, especially berries
- Olive oil
- Green tea
- Protein from lean, grass-fed beef and buffalo.

Supplements that might help with inflammation include:

- Vitamin D
- Omega-3 fatty acids as found in fish oils
- Herbs including curcumin, boswellia, and white willow bark.

Here's more info.

7. Here's a great way to stretch your neck

Use a towel or other cloth and pass it behind your neck.

Cross one end on a forward-upward diagonal, and the other on a forward-downward diagonal.

Switch your hand grip so that your right hand holds the left end of the towel and your left hand holds the right end.

Pull across with both hands to create a stretch/traction effect at the base of the skull.

Repeat using the opposite diagonal.

8. Strengthen your upper back muscles to minimize forward-head sag

Lie forward over the edge of your bed with your head and two or three inches of the upper back hanging over the end.

Lift your head and just your upper back to vertical. Keep your lower back still. Repeat 6-8 times.

If that becomes easy, you can make it more challenging by clasping your hands behind your head. Now you have to lift the weight of your head plus the weight of your arms.

You can make it more difficult still by adding a twist. Alternate twisting to the right and left.

Here's a video of me performing this action (using a stool instead of a bed). There are a few other good exercises that this video covers, too.

The next step?

Take care of your spine!

The spine is one of your most important organs. It's the central axis for all body movement, and, because it houses the spinal cord, it's also a major signaling center for all of your nerve activity.

The self-care tips in this report will help keep your spine healthy.

However, if your spine needs extra attention, your next step is to book an appointment for a consultation with me, Dr. Lavine. I can thoroughly examine you and delve into the details behind your specific spinal problems.

Click this link to request an appointment with Dr. Lavine