

CARING FOR YOUR BACK

People with spinal pathology usually have a genetic tendency or susceptibility towards spinal disease. The spinal column is one organ and people who have lower back problems frequently will develop, or at the same time have, neck problems. Spinal surgery should be reserved for nerve compression and intractable pain that impairs a patient's everyday life and functionality substantially. Spinal surgery changes the biomechanics of the spine and frequently leads to further spinal surgery. The mainstay in the treatment of back pain therefore is prevention. This chapter aims to explain how to go about putting as little strain on your spine as possible.

Precautions

Sleeping:

Do not sleep on your stomach. It is better to lie on your side with a pillow between your knees, preferably on your better side. You may also lie on your back with pillows under your knees. Make sure that your mattress provides proper support.

Rolling in bed:

When you roll to your right, bend your left knee, and keep your right leg straight. Press with your left hand against your left knee. Push away with your left leg to roll. It is important to remember that when you roll from your back to your side, your shoulder and hip must move together (log rolling).





These photos demonstrate how to get out of bed. Note how the top picture shows that you should use your left hand to support yourself when you are lying on your right side. Bend your knees and move your feet over the edge of the bed. Press up with your elbow to lift the upper body while letting your legs down the bed until you sit over the edge of the bed as demonstrated on the below. Then stand up straight, using your legs without bending your back.

Getting out of bed:

If you must wear back support (brace), it must be in position before you continue. Roll on your side as in the step above. Bend your knees and move your feet over the edge of the bed. Press up with your elbow to lift the upper body while letting your legs down the bed until you sit over the edge of the bed. Glide off the bed until your feet touch the floor and stand up straight. The first time you stand up after your procedure, your physiotherapist must be with you. Sit over the edge of the bed or stand next to the bed for a few seconds and take a few deep breaths to avoid dizziness.



Sitting:

When sitting, the chair you are using must have proper back and arm support. To stand up, move forward on the chair. Push up with your arms and use your strong thigh muscles to stand, while keeping your back straight.

These photos demonstrate how to sit. Note how the top left picture shows how to sit properly and the other two photos show poor posture that increases the strain on the spine and specifically the joints and the intervertebral discs.



These photos demonstrate how to stand. Try to stand with your back straight, head up and chin in. The use of a footstool helps to relieve swayback and relieves the pressure on the lower back.

Standing:

Do not stand for long periods at a time. Do not stand slouching with the lower back arched. Try to stand with your back straight, head up and chin in. The use of a footstool helps to relieve swayback.

Driving:

When you get in the car, first sit on the seat with your feet still outside the car on the ground. Then swing your legs into the car. Remember to stabilise with your core muscles. The same applies for when you want to get out of the car. First swing your legs out, and then stand up. Remember to stabilise with your core muscles.

When driving long distances, it is advisable to stop every 1-2 hours and walk a few times around the vehicle before you continue your journey.



The picture on the top left demonstrates how to enter the car. Note that you should sit down with your back straight and your knees together. Then swing your legs into the car while you tighten your stomach muscles. This puts the least strain on your back and is especially important if you have diagnosed abnormality of your intervertebral discs. On the top right the model demonstrates getting out of a car. When getting out of the car the legs are swung out first and then, with the back kept straight, you should stand up out of the car.

The bottom left picture demonstrates how you should sit when driving. It is important to check with your doctor or therapist on when you could drive and when you should not. Note that the back is always kept straight. If your car seat has lumbar support, it is important to engage this as well. Note that the position of the arms is such that the elbows are slightly bent and that you should be able to reach the steering wheel without effort.



The photo above on the right demonstrates the incorrect way of getting out of a car. Note how the model is hanging onto the steering wheel.

Bending:

When you bend down, keep your back straight and bend your knees. Remember to stabilise with your core muscles while doing the movement as been shown to you by your physiotherapist.

Avoid picking up, pushing, or pulling heavy objects. When you need to lift a object:

Use your strong thigh muscles to lift, not your back muscles. Place feet apart and firmly on the ground.

Bend your knees and not your hips. Face the direction that you intend to go. Hold the object close to your body.

Lift the object by straightening your knees and hold your back as straight as possible.

Do not lift objects above your head.

Put the object down the same way you picked it up. Try not to carry unbalanced weights.

Push rather than pull.



These pictures demonstrate lifting. The top picture demonstrates the correct way of bending and lifting. Bend your knees and not your hips. Face the direction that you intend to go. Hold the object close to your body. Lift the object by straightening your knees and hold your back as straight as possible.

The bottom picture demonstrates the incorrect way of lifting. The amount of strain that you place on your lower back with this manoeuvre is extremely high.





Bend your knees and not at your hips. Face the direction that you intend to go. Hold the object close to your body. Lift the object by straightening your knees and hold your back as straight as possible.



Walking and exercise:

If your back is extremely painful, try to avoid going up and down stairs. Walking and dancing are strongly recommended. Walk as much as possible. Ask your doctor when you are allowed to start with your specific sport. You are not allowed to do sit-ups ever again.

Around the house:

Daily activities need to be done correctly for the rest of your life. All equipment should have long handles so that you do not have to bend down too much.

Vacuuming: The vacuum cleaner should be pushed with short sweeps rather than long lunges to avoid excessive strain on your back.



All equipment should have long handles so that you do not have to bend down too much. The vacuum cleaner should be pushed with short sweeps rather than long lunges to avoid excessive strain on your back.

Kitchen: Do not reach for objects on high shelves, rather use a step ladder or get some assistance. Arrange your kitchen so that articles that are used daily are within reach. If you need to stand for long periods of time such as when ironing or at the kitchen sink, stand with one foot on a box/footrest. Never bend forward with your knees straight when reaching for anything out of lower cupboards.



Arrange your kitchen so that articles/objects that are used daily are within reach. In the photo on the left the model has used a footstool to reach a box on a high shelf - this is the correct way. The photo on the right demonstrates the incorrect way of reaching for an object on a high shelf.



Never bend forward with your knees straight when reaching for anything out of lower cupboards. Make sure that you bend in the correct manner as in the photo above. Try to arrange your cupboards so that the cupboards that you use the most is at waist height and above.



It is important that you keep your back straight when doing chores that involve standing, like ironing or doing the dishes. If you need to stand for long periods of time, stand with one foot on a box/footrest.

Laundry:

Never carry clothes in a heavy laundry basket, rather use a small basket. It is better to make several trips instead of staggering under a load of heavy wet washing. Do not bend or stretch to hang the washing. Put the clothes basket on a chair/table and use a step ladder to hang the washing.



Making beds:

Your back pain will be aggravated by bending forward when you need to tuck in the sheets. The best way to tuck in the sheets would be to do so while kneeling at the bedside. Never attempt to turn the mattress by yourself. Ask for assistance. The picture on the left demonstrates the correct way and on the right the incorrect way of tucking in the sheets.



General advice

Avoid sudden or jerky movements.

Try not to hold any position for too long. Do not exhaust yourself.

Do not wear high heels for long periods of time. It is better to shower than to bath.

If your back aches, try to relieve the pain before it gets worse. Soak in a hot bath or shower.

Apply any other form of heat to painful area such as a hot water bottle or a hot beanbag.

Curl up in the foetal position and hold for 5 minutes.

Literature teaches us that walking for an hour a day for the rest of your life is the best treatment of back pain and the best prevention of future back pain.