

# Back Care

## A Guide to Management



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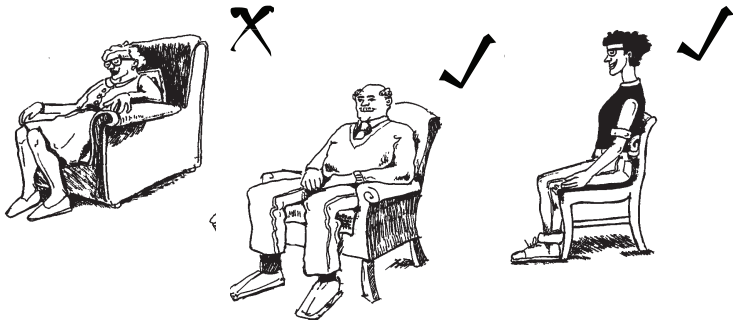
## **Introduction**

Up to 80% of all people experience low back pain at some time during their life. By taking care of your back, the strain on back muscles, joints, discs and ligaments is reduced – thus reducing the incidence and intensity of back pain.

This guide has been produced to help you manage your back and your pain. Try the suggestions in this guide and do the exercises prescribed by your physiotherapist. You are responsible for minimising your pain by following these simple self-help management strategies. Please speak with your health care professional if you have any queries.

## Sitting Correctly

- » Use a firm chair that has a straight back.
- » Sit as far back as possible in the chair.
- » Use a lumbar support (eg rolled towel or foam roll) in the small of the back to help maintain the curve in your back.
- » Don't slouch.
- » Hips and knees should be at right angles.
- » Feet flat on the floor – you may need to put your feet on a low stool.
- » Distribute weight evenly over both feet.



## Other Hints

- » Avoid deep couches.
- » Don't sit for too long – get up regularly and move around.
- » If you have been sitting for a while, after standing up, arch your back to give it a stretch.
- » Avoid crossing your legs at the knees, cross at the ankles instead.

## Sitting at a Desk

When sitting at a desk, sit close to the desk to help maintain good posture. The desk should be at the correct height – e.g. when writing, the forearms should be horizontal with the surface of the desk.



## Sitting in the Car

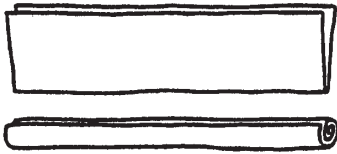
- » Sit close to the steering wheel.
- » Try using a lumbar roll.
- » If your hips are bent too much, try sitting on a small cushion or folded towel.
- » Interrupt long journeys by stopping and walking for a few minutes.

## Lying Down

It is essential to sleep on a firm mattress. A piece of hardwood can be placed under a mattress which is too soft.

If you have pain when lying down or if you regularly wake in the morning with a painful lower back, which wasn't painful the night before, try the following tips:

- » Wear a supportive roll around your waist at night. Try rolling up a beach towel and tying it around your waist.



- » When lying on your back try using one or two pillows under your knees.



- » When lying on your side try placing a pillow between your knees. If you do not use a rolled towel around your waist. Try using a small pillow or foam roll at waist level.



## How to Sit up from Lying Down

1. Bend both knees and roll over to one side.

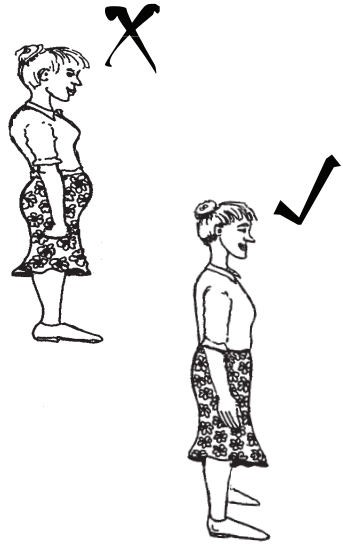


2. Lower your legs over the side of the bed and push up with your arms.

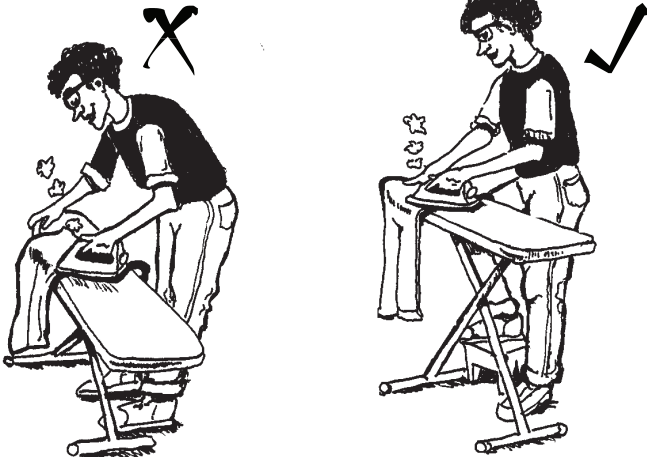


## Standing Correctly

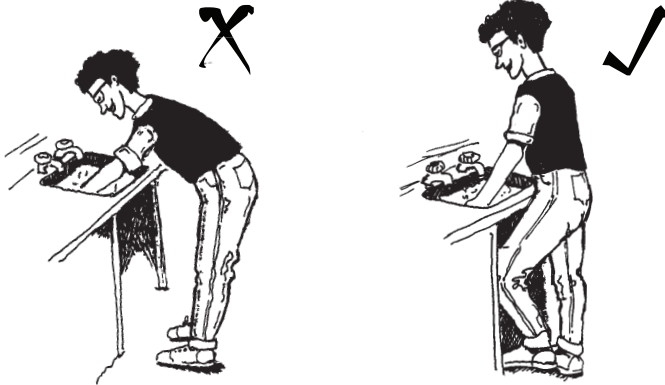
- » Weight evenly distributed over both feet, just in front of the heels.
- » Don't over-straighten (or lock) your knees.
- » Tighten your stomach muscles slightly.
- » Shoulders relaxed, but back and down.
- » Chin tucked in slightly.
- » Think 'stand tall'.
- » Don't slouch.



Standing for a long time can increase back pain. Try standing with one foot on a small stool.



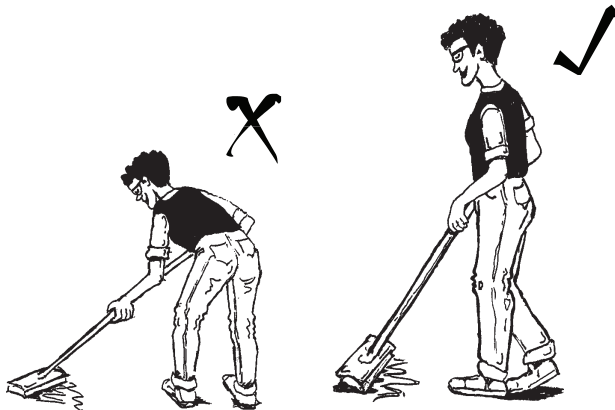
When standing at a bench, try opening the cupboard door and resting one foot on the ledge.



People often work in the standing position such as when sweeping, vacuuming or digging. Try to keep upright to maintain the hollow in your back.

Avoid bending your back – bend your knees and tighten your abdominal muscles instead.

Work with one foot in front. If you have been working with your back bent, take a break, and regularly stretch backwards.



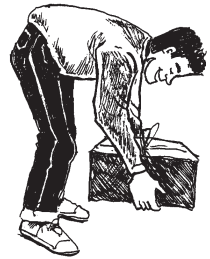
## Lifting

Lifting or bending puts considerable stress on your back. It is important to lift correctly.

Plan the lift; check the area is free of obstacles; check the weight – it may be safer to carry the load in two trips or to get help.

### Correct Lifting

- » Stand close to the object.
- » Feet should be shoulder width apart. Having one foot slightly ahead of the other foot will help to improve your balance.
- » Bend at the hips and knees, bottom out (i.e. maintain the natural curve of your back), don't bend your lower back.
- » Grip firmly with the whole hand.
- » Tighten your stomach and back muscles.
- » Lift using your leg muscles.
- » Keep the object close to your body.
- » All movements should be smooth – avoid jerking and twisting.
- » Use your feet to change direction – **DO NOT TWIST THE SPINE**, especially while lifting.
- » While carrying the object, keep the back erect and take small steps.
- » Stretch backwards before and after lifting heavy objects.



## Miscellaneous Advice

- » Change your posture regularly before fatigue and pain starts.
- » Before you sneeze or cough, gently tighten your abdominal and back muscles.
- » Maintain a good weight – being overweight places more strain on your back.
- » Remember your back is more at risk when you are tired, unwell or in the first few hours of the day – avoid risky and strenuous activities during these times.
- » Wear well fitting, cushioned shoes with low heels and non-slip soles.
- » Be aware of early warning signs of back strain including:
  - stiffness after sitting, or first thing in the morning
  - occasional minor twinges of pain
  - feeling as if your back is weak
  - feeling like you've pulled a muscle.
- » When warning signs are present, stop the activity which may be aggravating your back; follow the back care rules about your posture.

## Exercise

**Exercise is extremely important in minimising back pain.**

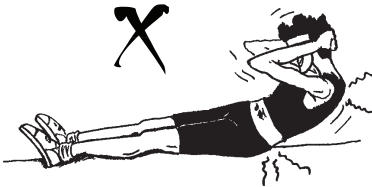
Try the following tips:

- » Keep your back as flexible as possible – continue daily with the stretches given to you by your physiotherapist
- » Strong back, abdominal and leg muscles will help to decrease back strain. Again, continue daily with your strengthening exercises
- » Maintain general fitness with regular exercise such as walking and gentle exercise classes (including water exercises)
- » When you are tired after exercising or working do NOT relax by sitting slumped in a chair as this will stress your back. Rest by lying down instead
- » Avoid exercises that cause pain and stress on the back and knees.

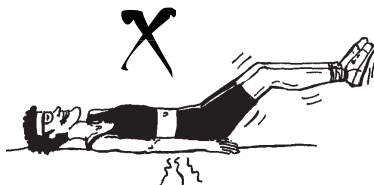
## Exercises to Avoid

Some common exercises can be harmful as they place too much stress on the back or knees. Avoid the following exercises:

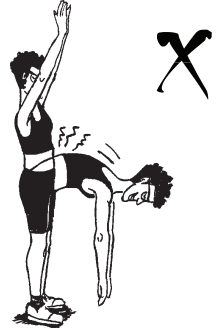
**Do not** do straight leg abdominal curls. This exercise should only be done with knees bent and with hands on the chest or beside the trunk.



**Do not** do double straight leg raises. Do not raise both legs off the ground together. Instead, lift one straight leg up at a time. The other leg should be bent at the knee and on the ground.



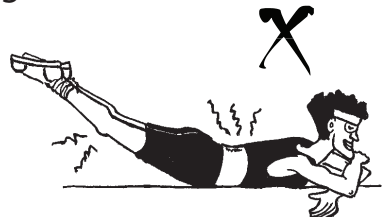
**Do not** touch your toes in standing.



Do not do deep knee bends. Knee bends should only be done to a maximum of 90°.



**Do not** do double leg extensions. Only raise one leg at a time.



## Management of an Acute Attack of Back Pain

If you experience an acute attack of back pain use the following guidelines:

- » Stop the activity which may have caused the problem.
- » Lie down and take the weight off the spine, using the positions shown in this guide. If lying on your stomach helped previously, use this.
- » Apply heat (hot water bottle/hot pack – available from a chemist).
- » Try a supporting roll as described in this guide.
- » Sit as little as possible. Sit correctly and for short periods only.
- » Avoid lifting and bending forward.
- » Avoid risky activities for at least 6 weeks.
- » **DO NOT** lie in bed for more than 2 days. Prolonged bed rest is worse for your back than a gradual return to normal activities.

### Contact your Doctor if:

- » The pain worsens
- » You are no better after 24 hours
- » You are experiencing pins and needles in your legs.



An Australian Government Initiative

## **Resthaven Therapy Services**

### **Locations**

#### **Resthaven Northern Community Services**

16 Gillingham Road, Elizabeth 5112

Telephone (08) 8252 6811

northernncs@resthaven.asn.au

#### **Resthaven Marion Community Services**

43 Finnis Street, Marion SA, 5043

Telephone (08) 8296 4042

marioncs@resthaven.asn.au

#### **Resthaven Paradise & Eastern Community Services**

61 Silkes Road, Paradise SA, 5075

Telephone (08) 8337 4371

pecs@resthaven.asn.au

For more information about this and other services offered by Resthaven, visit:

**[www.resthaven.asn.au](http://www.resthaven.asn.au)**

### **Fees**

Resthaven Therapy Services are funded by the Department of Health and Ageing. However, as this funding does not cover the full cost of services a small contribution towards the cost is appreciated.

