


4 EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES THAT MAY BE HURTING YOUR BACK

By: Dr. John A. Papa

80% of all Canadians will suffer at least one significant episode of back pain in their lives. Back pain can have a profound negative impact on an individual's work, recreational, and social life. Back pain is the second most common medical complaint, after the common cold. There are many biological tissues that can generate pain in the back. These may include muscles, ligaments, joints, nerves, and bones. All of these tissues can become irritated when exposed to an environment that promotes injury. Back pain prevention focuses on minimizing abnormal and excessive stresses on these biological structures. Many individuals are unable to identify a specific incident that brought on their back pain. Therefore, it is important to identify some of the common everyday activities that can significantly contribute to back pain.

- 1. Lifting:** Improper lifting is a risk factor associated with back pain. There are several strategies that should routinely be employed during lifting activities. Maintaining the natural and neutral curves (hollow) of your low back is important, as this is its strongest and most secure position. Avoid awkward postures such as bending, reaching, twisting, and turning as this makes the back less stable and puts extra stress on biological tissues. Alternatively, you should square your body toward the object being lifted, turn your whole body by moving your feet, and keep the object close to your body. Contracting your abdominal muscles during lifting, lowering, and moving activities improves spinal stability, referred to as bracing. You should bend at the legs and not the waist, lifting slowly and smoothly, not jerking. Minimizing lift load and exposure, taking mini-breaks, and job rotations can also be helpful. The use of assistive devices such as dollies, handgrips, and pull carts is also recommended. You are more likely to be injured early in the morning than later in the day as the biological tissues in the back become more flexible and accustomed to gravity.
- 2. Prolonged sitting positions:** Most people that sit for prolonged periods of time will eventually adopt a poor posture that includes losing the natural hollow of the low back, rounding or slouching forward of the upper back and shoulders, and a forward head poking position. Even slight slouching to the side, backward, or forward puts cumulative compressive and stretching stresses on biological tissues that can cause significant back discomfort, chronic headaches and pain. Take 10 to 30 second stretch or posture breaks every 20 to 40 minutes to make sure weight is evenly distributed, your shoulders are not rounding forward, and you are not slouching. The use of a lumbar support can also be used to assist in helping maintain the natural hollow of your low back and maintain proper posture.
- 3. Working in stooped positions:** When standing with your back straight, the stresses on biological tissues in your back are considerably lower than when your back is bent forward. Many activities around the home and workplace cause you to bend forward or stoop. While working in these forward bent positions, you are more likely to sustain back problems, especially in the first several hours of the day. In order to minimize risk of injury, you should interrupt

the stooped position at regular intervals before pain starts. Standing upright and bending backward five or six times can be helpful. Trying to find alternative ways of completing tasks without stooping is ideal.

4. **Lying and resting surface:** Individuals who get back pain when resting or lying down generally have something wrong with the surface they are lying or resting on or the position in which they do so. A process of trial and error may be required to determine the cause. When it comes to surface, make sure that your mattress does not sag or that it is not too hard. A soft mattress can be comfortable provided it is placed on a firm support. Avoid beds with a wire base and use a solid base instead, with a rubber or innerspring mattress on top of it. Trying different sleeping positions may alleviate back pain, but is often more difficult as sleeping positions can change frequently throughout the course of the night. A homemade lumbar support to be used while sleeping can also be helpful.

Decreasing your risk for back pain is the first step in prevention. For some, back pain can be dramatically minimized or avoided; while for others it needs to be managed so that its negative effects on activities of daily living can be reduced. It is important to recognize the early signs and symptoms of back injury, which may include: swelling, bruising, numbness, tingling, pain, headaches, and difficulty with movement. You should consult with a licensed health professional who deals with back pain if your symptoms are severe or do not subside within two or three days. Ignoring these early warning signs may result in chronic pain down the road. A qualified health professional can determine the cause of your pain and prescribe appropriate therapy, exercises, and back sparing strategies specifically for your circumstance. For more information visit www.nhwc.ca.

This article is a basic summary for educational purposes only. It is not intended, and should not be considered, as a replacement for consultation, diagnosis or treatment by a duly licensed health practitioner.