

8 WAYS TO TREAT AND AVOID BACKACHE

If you've never had back ache, you're one of the lucky ones. But don't be too smug - it could be your turn any day now.

Eight out of ten people will have at least one attack of bad back pain in their lives - and once you've had the first, it's almost certain that you'll get it again.

Because of back pain, 67 million working days are lost, there are 2.25 million visits to GP's, and 1.5 million people are on invalidity benefit each year. Working drivers are three times more likely to suffer, 80% of VDU workers will get it and it costs the NHS £350 million a year.

Backache has several causes - damaged discs between the vertebrae, pressure on a spinal nerve, misalignment of any of the 110 joints in the spine, inflammation of a joint, muscle spasm, damaged ligaments or any combination of them.

The pain may come on gradually, stab you in the back without warning or drop you on the floor in screaming agony. When the sciatic nerve is involved there's pain in the affected leg - sometimes as far as the toes. Women may think they're having menstrual problems and men sometimes get referred pain into their testicles. Damage to the upper part of the back can produce pain in the front of the chest, neck problems are a common cause of headaches and pain in the arms and hands.

If you've ever had a pain in your back, if you're suffering now, or if you want to reduce the risks of ever joining the backache club, all you have to do is follow my 8 step guide to get you back to strength.

1. Coping with housework, gardening and small children.

The most hazardous occupation for the back is being a housewife, (or househusband). Work surfaces are never the ideal height, most tasks involve bending and twisting and the vacuum cleaner doesn't come with advice on the best way to use it.

The perfect working height is 2.4inches below your elbow, so the normal height at 3ft. won't suit short or tall people. Raise or lower your kitchen units if possible, or stand on a platform at the most used surface. Make a footwell under the kitchen sink so that you're not standing 18 inches away. Have one table which is just right for you. Sit down to iron and prepare vegetables - I know it sounds awkward, but it's only what you get used to.

Stand upright to push the cleaner round the room, moving your feet not body. Hold brooms and mops in front of you and use pushing movements with the arms. Clean the bath with a long handled mop so you don't have to stretch to the far corners. Kneel to tuck in the bed clothes - better still use a duvet - and never stretch over the bed to fix the other side. Don't dust above shoulder height, use small steps.

Ovens are a major disaster area. The last thing you want is to think about Christmas when you've still got the smell of the beach in your nose, but a 20 pound turkey, stuffing, potatoes, gravy and the largest roasting pan in the house, means lots of work for osteopaths on Boxing Day. Always use your leg muscles to lift with, keeping the back as straight as possible. Avoid bending by keeping the utensils and crockery you use most, on higher shelves.

Heavy weights should be held close to the chest. A 10 pound baby, lifted out of its cot are arms length because you don't bother to lower the side, exerts five times its weight on your back. Carrying baby on your hip is not much better as the weight is all on one side, so try a sling instead.

Gardening is rewarding and great exercise, but take care of your back. Use long handled tools, lightweight barrows, a kneeling pad and a small spade. Both indoors and out, don't do

the same job for hours on end, but have two or three on the go. Switch round every ten minutes to avoid continual strain on the same joints and muscles.

2. Pregnancy

This is a time when most women suffer. Don't gain more weight than is good for the baby - you're not eating for two. Keep active, swim or go to aquaerobics, (exercises in water), walk, do the exercises below and concentrate on keeping your bottom well tucked in. This avoids the protruding backside which hollows your back too much. Osteopathic treatment is a great help up to the last minute.

3. Posture

Posture makes perfect. Look at yourself in a full length mirror, wearing only your undies. See if your shoulders are level, are the buckles on the bra straps at the same height? Does the waist of your knickers slope down from one hip to the other? Do you have a back that's too curved or too flat? Do you always stand with more weight on one foot than the other?

Practise standing tall - not rigid like a guard at Buck House - think of someone pulling your hair straight up, but gently. Broaden the shoulders and lengthen the back. Think of tucking in your tail and try doing it. It's hard to get this right, but easy if you think of rather rude movements!

4. Exercise

Running long distances on hard pavements, aerobics, step and slide classes can all send you home with backache and other joint problems. The best exercise is swimming - not too much breast stroke - walking, yoga, stretch and conditioning classes, dancing, old fashioned classes like the Women's League of Health and Beauty, or any sport you enjoy though probably not weight lifting or kick boxing.

5. Beds and Chairs

Have a look at your bed. If you're still sleeping in the same one you've had for 20 years, it probably sags in the middle, rolls you into one another and doesn't support your spine. Ignore the adverts for magical "orthopaedic" beds that are very expensive and recommended by experts. All the leading bed manufacturers make excellent extra firm beds so take your time, try them out and don't be hassled by sales reps. knocking on your door.

Any seat that you occupy for long periods of time is vital to the cause and relief of backache. The soft, very low armchair that you fall asleep in front of the TV every night in and the office chair which glues you to the VDU for six hours a day, need close scrutiny. The armchair should have a high straight back and a firm seat, the office chair must be adjustable for height, rake and back support, and you should have a footstool.

Employers have a legal duty to provide work stations which put you at the least risk of postural problems, eye strain, headaches, stiff necks, pains in the shoulders and arms, repetitive strain injuries and backache. These can all be avoided by the proper work stations and chairs.

6. The Car

Choose your car for the seat, rather than its colour or performance. Price is seldom a factor in relation to good driving seats. I've tried some of the most expensive vehicles on the road and been appalled by the quality of their seats. Many years ago I bought an old fourth hand Toyota Supra as it had the best seat I'd ever found in a standard production car. Until it finally fell apart, I was driving my fifth of the same model, just because of the seats. Sit in the

drivers seat, put your hands on the wheel at ten to two, your feet on the pedals, and see if arms and legs are pointing straight, or off to the side, which will create muscle strain and pain.

7. Silly Shoes, Shoulder Bags and Shopping

I was sad to see the stiletto make an unwelcome return last winter. Doc Martens, trainers and flatties may not be glamorous, but they're better for the feet and back. You all like wearing fancy shoes, but keep them for special outings, not every day.

The shoulder bag is another bane of the back, though few people realise how bad it is. Even empty, the shoulder must be hunched up to stop the strap sliding off. Your posture is altered and you end up with a curved back and the weight in all the wrong places. Just walk behind a group of lady traffic wardens to see what I mean.

Shopping needs care. Two smaller bags not one huge one, evens out the load on your spine. Try to avoid standing for too long - where have the chairs in shops gone? Lifting heavy goods in and out of a car boot, or getting the shopping trolley on the bus, are frequent triggers of back pain. Try to get someone to help, keep the weight close to you and lift up and down in straight lines.

8. Watch Your Weight

If you are overweight, the strain on spinal joints increases. If you are a back pain victim it's even more urgent to shed surplus pounds. No crash diets, meal replacements or weird and wonderful pills and potions. Sensible, healthy and enjoyable eating is the only sane way to do it. For a great selection of diets that will banish the bulges, just send .go to the "diet" section of the website.

If backache strikes don't just go to bed and lie there, the latest research shows that two weeks of bed rest can actually make matters worse not better. For most back problems the best treatment is manipulation though a tiny percentage of patients do need surgery. Unless you're one of them, ask your GP to recommend a local osteopath.

Start with one of the natural anti-inflammatory remedies, like FlexiHerb see www.flexiherb.co.uk a registered traditional herbal medicine containing Devil's Claw.

Despite this unlikely nickname for Harpagophytum procumbens, this African desert plant brings enormous relief to sufferers from arthritis and rheumatism. It's called Devil's Claw because of the vicious hooks on its fruits, which stick to animals' feet.

And to human feet, as I know only too well because I trod on a few when I was out digging for this plant with the bushmen in the Namibian desert. They've been using it as an anti-inflammatory medicine for centuries.

For general aches and pains there is nothing like a good massage, and there is no reason why a friend or partner shouldn't have a go. There are lots of good books, the best by Clare Maxwell-Hudson, but trust your natural instincts. It will work even better if you use the wonderful new Massage Balm with Arnica from Weleda.

It also contains Lavender and Rosemary, smells good and helps soothe away the discomfort.