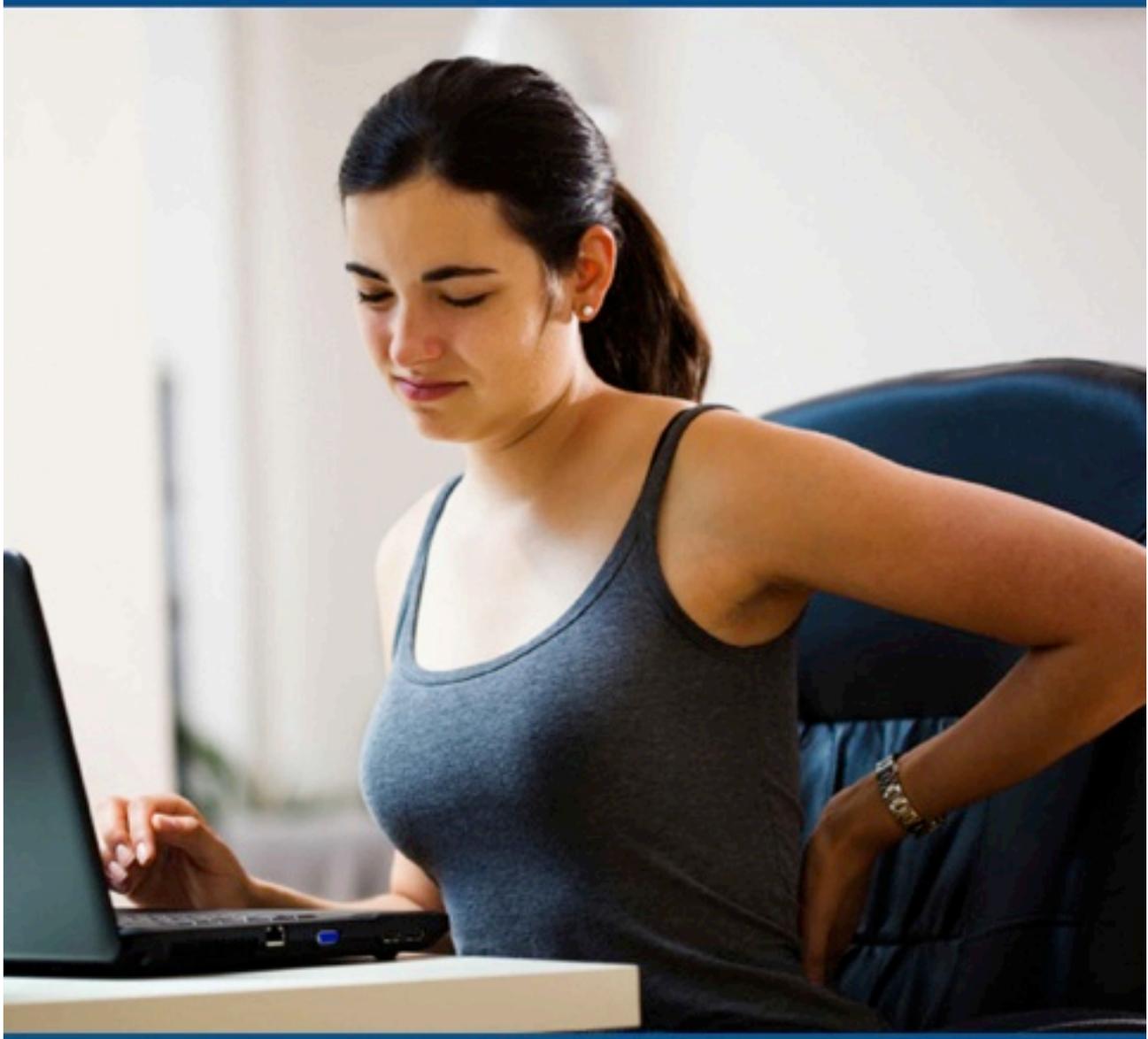


Avoiding Back Pain

A Simple Guide



By Cate Russell-Cole

Avoiding Back Pain A Simple Guide

By Cate Russell-Cole 2012

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Introduction

Back pain affects more of us than any other complaint, including heart disease and asthma. It is an epidemic which is largely avoidable, but rarely addressed in public health education. I grew up watching my father struggle with debilitating, chronic back pain that was never adequately relieved. Many of his spinal problems came from being a manual laborer at a time when work safety procedures, such as safe lifting and posture, were not seen as a priority. Our family paid for that attitude for the rest of my father's life. Back pain took him out of the workforce, decimated our family finances and chronically stressed our home life. He was often depressed and aggressive due to back pain.

Unsurprisingly, back care and safe lifting are educational issues very close to my heart. In 2009 I took an opportunity to work for a safe lifting education organization. The message of that organization will always be close to my heart. My aim is to never stop spreading it. When I left, I had permission to use the articles I had researched and written as I saw fit. This e-book contains all these articles and more. It is by no means, a complete resource on all aspects of the diseases and intricacies of spinal health, but will greatly assist you in taking care of your back. Even if a chapter doesn't look relevant to your needs, I encourage you to read it, as it may contain essential information that is not found in the other chapters.

The information in this book is quite diverse. Taking care of your spine is an issue for everyone, including mothers; athletes; military personnel; the aged; computer users and office workers who battle with back ache due to posture; builders; manual laborers; and anyone who regularly lifts, bends and twists their spine to get tasks done whether at home, work or recreationally.

The medical content in this e-book has been approved by a fully qualified, licensed, practicing Spinal Surgeon, with a Master's Degree in Spinal Biomechanics. If you want further information regarding the validity of this information, please contact me at: cate@virtual-desk.com.au

Please note: it is essential that I emphasize that these articles are *not a substitute* for independent professional advice, which will take into account your own unique circumstances and medical conditions. Also, as research and advances in medical techniques and knowledge continually occur, at some stage the information here may go out of date as we learn more and get better at preventing injury. Please don't use this book as the sole source of your information. Take further steps to ensure you have all the facts you need to get the best outcome for your health.

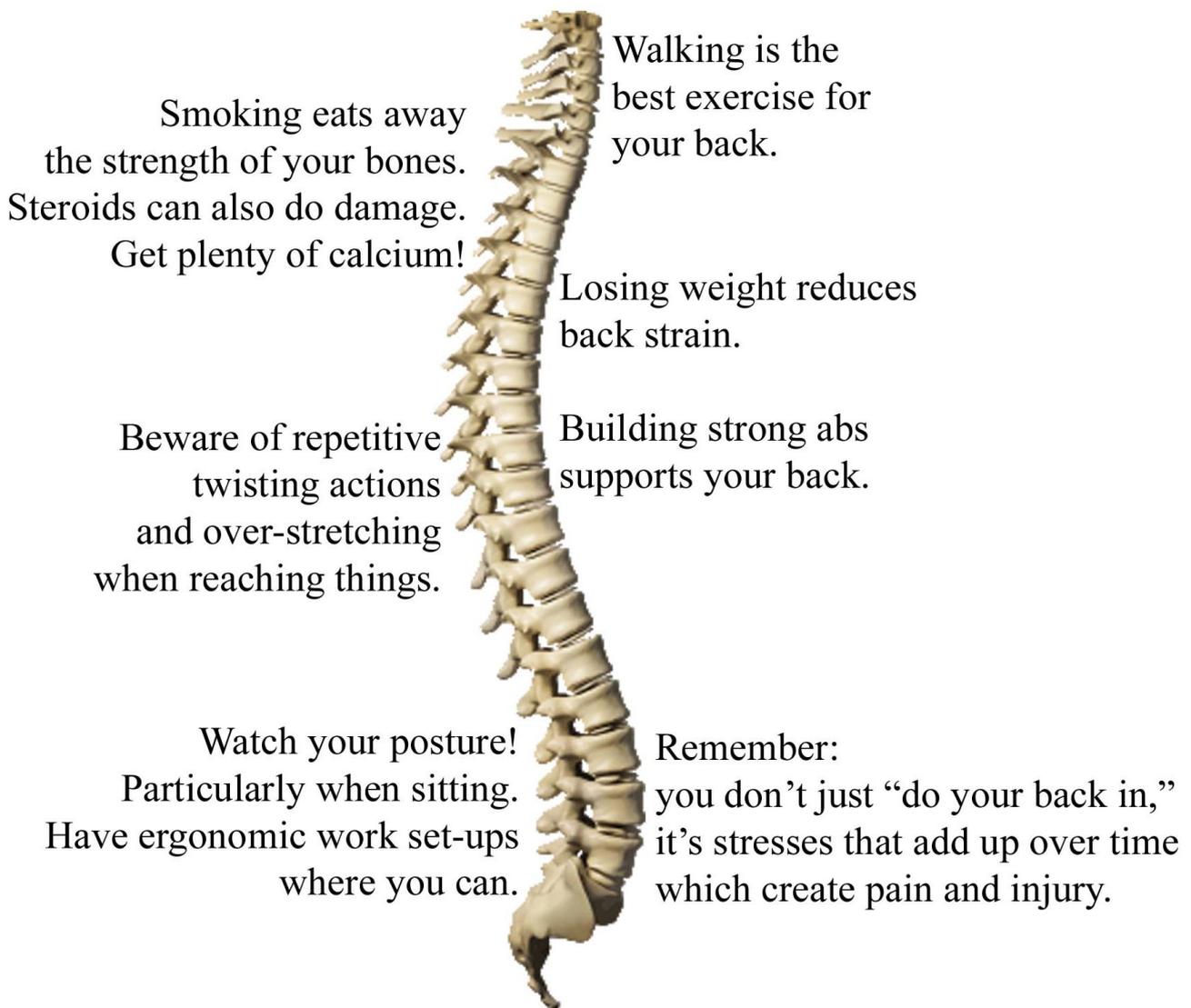
Wishing you excellent back health and a pain-free lifestyle.

Cate Russell-Cole

Back Health Essentials: A Simple Overview

The spine is an amazing part of the body. It is made up of bones, interlocking joints, shock absorbing cartilage; and is supported by the muscles and ligaments that surround it, enabling it to work efficiently. However, as it is such a slender structural system that we are so dependent on, it requires awareness and care to keep it functioning well.

These are the most important points you need to remember to keep your back in peak condition.



For more information on how your spine is structured and able to move, please visit this link: <http://www.depuy.com/patients-and-caregivers/back-and-neck/anatomy> Depuy Synthes is a company that makes medical implants which assist in surgically correcting spinal problems.

Basic Guidelines on How to Lift Anything

Before you lift: plan your approach:

- Test the object before you lift to see how heavy it is. Is it too much to handle?
- Make sure the load is stable and won't shift.
- Even if you have the strength to lift, if the item is heavy or awkward, get help.

The best way to lift objects without hurting your back is to follow these steps.

- Stop and plan what you are about to do.
- Bend your knees instead of your spine.
- Keep your back straight.



While you are lifting, be aware of what you're doing:

- Avoid arching your back and reaching above your head for an object.
- Get a tight grip on what you want to carry.
- Keep the item close to your body and your back straight.
- Lift slowly and smoothly without jerking.
- Carry the weight of the load between your shoulder and your waist.

Conditions Caused by Repetitive Back Strain

While feeling back pain is common throughout most people's lives, actual injury doesn't *just happen*. It occurs due to repetitive movements and is the result of a life time of lifting from the wrong position, poor posture, weight gain and/or neglect. Other health conditions such as osteoporosis, which can be made worse by smoking; also weaken our back's ability to carry the loads placed upon it. In summary, it all adds up to one thing: pain that can rob you of your enjoyment of life.

Medical conditions which are caused by inadequate back care include:

- Degenerative changes to the ligaments which support the spine.
- Tearing of the muscle fibers surrounding the spine, which results in pain and spasms. "Pulled" muscles are damaged muscles. They will not stretch and move as they used to, so your movements will become difficult. That is why people will say their back has "locked up."
- Degenerative disc disease: this is known as herniated discs or colloquially, "slipped discs."
- Spondylosis or Spinal Osteoarthritis.
- Spinal Stenosis: where pressure is placed on the spinal cord due to disc herniation or spondylosis. This can also have causes which are not related to poor back care.
- Sciatica: this is another common term for lumbar disc herniation.
- Spondylolisthesis / Retrolisthesis: when a vertebrae slips out of line, sometimes trapping a spinal nerve.
- Lumbago: this is an old school term to describe lower back pain caused by a herniated spinal disc, spondylosis, osteoporosis, scoliosis or spinal stenosis.
- Adult Onset Scoliosis, or Degenerative Scoliosis: an abnormal curve in your spine, which is created by the facet joints of the spine degenerating through wear and tear.
- Non-specific back pain: pain that cannot be directly linked to an identifiable condition, but occurs in the muscles, ligaments and/or joints in the back, neck and spine.

Osteoporosis is not caused by physical wear and tear due to poor lifting practices, however, it can be exacerbated by smoking; a low calcium diet; vitamin D deficiency from inadequate exposure to sunlight; excessive alcohol intake; a sedentary lifestyle which hampers the body in building strong bones; other pre-existing medical conditions and hereditary factors.

Like all spine-related medical conditions, you can improve your chances of beating the disease by ensuring you get adequate exercise, stop smoking, lose excessive weight and increase your calcium intake.

I know you have heard that message many times before and possibly, it sounds like a cliché. The reason it keeps being repeated is simple: it really is the best way.

Spinal Osteoarthritis (Spondylosis)

Osteoarthritis is one of the most common forms of Arthritis and one in ten Australians develop it. It is commonly seen to be a normal, perhaps unavoidable part of the aging process. However, not all patients with osteoarthritis are hampered with chronic pain and activity restrictions. There are steps you can take to prevent and minimize your symptoms and risk of developing the disease.

Spinal Osteoarthritis is caused by the degeneration of the cartilage which cushions the interlocking facet joints in the spine.



Your facet joints are a series of joints which run down the back of your spine and link each vertebrae into the one above and below it. They allow each vertebrae to move up and rotate without the vertebrae sliding out of place.

Where each joint meets, cartilage is present which acts as a soft shield so the bones don't rub against each other. Normal cartilage is smooth and allows your joints to move freely as you bend, turn and stretch. In osteoarthritis, the cartilage becomes rough and worn. Parts break off and the facet joint can no longer freely move. This creates the characteristic pain and stiffness of osteoarthritis.

In more advanced cases, the facet joints move closer together as significant cartilage is lost, then rub together. This may create bone spurs (osteophytes), which hinder natural movement or may press on spinal nerves. Over time the bone surfaces can be worn out of their natural shape. This means they won't lock together properly and can become unstable.

Osteoarthritis develops slowly over time and early on, may be noticeable as aching joints after activity. Over time the symptoms of osteoarthritis may include stiffness that is worse in the morning and evening; swelling and warmth in the diseased joints; tenderness around the affected area; ache when moving; loss of flexibility and spasms in the muscles around the joint. It can start with one joint and then progress to involve others.

Poor lifting habits increase the likelihood of developing spinal osteoarthritis, as so much extra strain is put on the joints of the spine through stressful and repetitive movements. If you have suffered previous muscular-skeletal injury, have a family history of osteoarthritis or have extra strain on your spine through being overweight, your likelihood of developing osteoarthritis is greatly increased.

Reducing the strain you place on your back and neck through correct lifting techniques, staying moving and opting for a healthier diet will help.

When you think of osteoarthritis it is easy to focus on the restrictions that chronic pain and loss of movement could place on you. With proper care and positive action, you can minimize the effects and prevent further damage. Practical studies have found that patients who learn about their condition, take positive action to improve their health and adopt a positive fighting attitude can do very well. The goal is to always maintain a full, gratifying lifestyle.

The management of osteoarthritis includes gentle exercise; a common sense approach to any activity you do; adopting a beneficial diet and finding effective ways to manage your pain and any loss of motion you may experience. The worst thing you can do is stop moving as a response to pain. That creates a cycle in which you lose more flexibility and movement, which in turn, further increases your pain level. Weight bearing exercises improve your muscle strength and flexibility. That also helps you avoid falls. Exercise also encourages your body to build more strong bone, which will prevent osteoporosis.

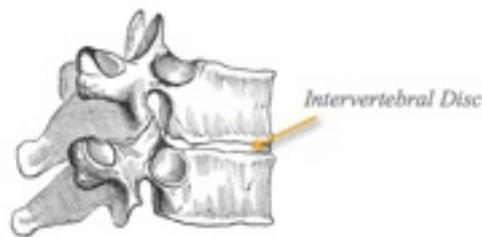
If you want to avoid osteoarthritis, talk to your doctor to assess your overall health and get an action plan. Become aware of your lifting habits and the demands you are placing on your spine. Do what you can to make the load lighter. The earlier you take action to care for yourself, the better the results will be. However, it's never too late to get moving and improve your spine's health. Doing so will let you get on with enjoying your life.



Spinal Disc Herniation

Your spinal discs are one of the hardest working parts of your body. These small structures sit snugly between every vertebrae in your spine and give it stability, while buffering the stress of every shift your spine makes. Disc herniation is often incorrectly referred to as a “slipped disc.” Discs do not slip. Discs are built to withstand constant movement and pressure. They are very strongly tethered to the vertebrae above and below them. With aging and abnormal demands placed on them, they dry out, becoming misshapen and less able to do the job they were designed for. A damaged disc will thin, stretch, bulge or split, but they do not slide or slip out of place. When we refer to disc herniation, we are talking about serious damage to the disc’s structure.

Spinal disc herniation is caused by excessive demands on the disc over time. Tissues cannot keep pace with the abnormal wear and tear. The aging process alone will not create disc herniation. The intervertebral discs are designed to be rugged. Over the course of the day they enable the demands of every move your spine makes, whether sitting, standing or lying down. At the end of the day you are slightly shorter than you are at the beginning. This is because over that time, your discs have become compressed from the weight placed on them and they dry out a little. Overnight, your discs rehydrate and regain their height, ready for the next day’s activities. Lumbar disc problems are more common, as the lowest discs bear the heaviest load.



The intervertebral discs are classed as joints, allow movement in any direction your spine goes. As you move, the surrounding vertebrae compress the disc and it flattens and bulges a little, acting like a shock absorber that stops the vertebrae from grinding or bumping together. Discs are not cartilage. They are made up of an outer ring (similar to a car tyre) made up of a tough fibrous tissue and a soft, pulpy inner mass which is like jelly. It is the part of the disc which bears the load. Like cartilage, as your discs move, waste products are flushed out of them and nutrients are cycled back in, to keep your discs hydrated and healthy. This is another reason why moderate exercise and activity is so essential to maintain back health. If your discs sit in one position for a long period of time (e.g. sitting at a desk or long distance driving), they deplete and wear faster and become liable to herniate. Discs were built to move and refresh themselves. Excessive wear and tear from incorrect lifting greatly adds to that wear and accelerates you towards serious disc damage.

Symptoms of disc herniation depend on what part of the spine the herniation has occurred in; whether the nerves exiting the spine near the disc are affected; and how badly the disc is damaged. They may vary from a back ache, to deep muscle pain, spasms of pain, or numbness and weakness in an arm, leg, shoulders or across your chest. Sciatica pain is caused by lumbar disc herniation. The pain travels through your buttocks, then down a leg to the ankle or foot. Where there is compression on a spinal nerve because of a herniated disc, the pain will travel a specific path. It may occur

suddenly, vary in severity from day to day and may be relieved when you move your spine in a way that takes pressure off the disc affected.

In a minority of cases, the nerves which lead to the bowel and bladder can be affected and you can experience loss of function in these areas. This is rare, but if you are showing any symptoms of loss of those bodily functions, you need to get medical help immediately. If left untreated, the damage may not be reversible.

Problems with discs can sometimes rectify as the body heals itself. Not every damaged disc produces crippling pain or requires surgical intervention. The best course of action, as always, is prevention. Being aware of the load you place on your spinal structures and taking action to reduce the risks of moving the wrong way, will help your body regenerate itself and stay flexible and pain free.

Paying attention to the way you lift is critical in ensuring you maintain optimal spinal health.

- Stop and plan what you are about to do. How can I do this and be safe?
- Should I ask someone to help me?
- Bend your knees instead of your spine.
- Make sure you keep your back as straight as you can when you lift.
- Keep whatever you are lifting or moving close to your body, keeping the centre of gravity as close to your spine as possible to reduce strain.

What Type of Bag Do You Carry?

When I was at school, we used sports bags for our books. After looking at the health statistics and carrying out research, it was suggested that one possible cause for Adolescent *Scoliosis, was carrying those heavy bags in one hand. It was thought that a lopsided manner of carrying bags, placed extra stress on the growing spine, causing it to curve abnormally.

An answer was found. Backpacks were bought in for school use. The idea was that they would distribute the weight more evenly. However, over time the argument has continued as some studies claim that Scoliosis in adolescents is still too prominent, thus the back packs weren't the answer. Others have argued that backpacks are the correct solution, however, they are being over-filled and worn too low on the back; thus the continued damage.

While a great choice, any backpack, whatever age you use them, may be too large for your body; packed unevenly so the weight is unevenly distributed; or carried by the handles. Doing so defeats their purpose. One study found that the weight of backpacks carried by children was more than it is recommended that a fully grown, adult body should carry. A child's backpack weight should not exceed ten percent of their own body weight.

Over-filling anything you carry has the potential to do you damage. That doesn't just include backpacks. It includes handbags, laptop bags, shopping bags and briefcases. These are risk items we don't think about.

Handbags and briefcases come in various styles: some with long handles which can be slung across the shoulders to distribute weight more evenly; and some with very short hand-holds which, if heavy, will pull on your spine, shoulders and neck. Go to a busy bus stop. Often you will see workers juggling both a brief case *and* a laptop bag. Whether in school or out, the strain we are placing on our spines is increasing and if we aren't careful, so will our injuries.

So have a think about your habits in what you carry. What can you remove to lessen the load? Are the handles long enough and wide enough to distribute weight? Have you gotten into a bad habit of carrying your load only on one side of your body, stressing that side more? Anything small you can do to reduce the pull on your spine will be helpful.

* Scoliosis is an abnormal curve in your spine, which can occur in the upper (thoracic) or lower (lumbar) spine; sometimes both which creates what is called a double major curve. Scoliosis can range in seriousness from a mild problem which creates back pain, to curves so severe that they can reduce the amount of room needed for the heart, lungs and your gastrointestinal system. Long term untreated mild Scoliosis can create chronic pain and abnormal wear and tear on the facet joints and other structures of the spine; leading to additional medical problems.

Computer Use: Minimizing the Strain

I can spend fifty hours a week at my desk easily. My work depends on it; then when work is done, there are the usual tasks such as paying bills online and keeping in touch with distant friends and family. Quite often a day has flown by and I haven't moved position much. That not only strains my eyes, but it is a risk factor for back and neck problems.

In an office setting ergonomics has become a buzz word we have developed an immunity to. There are policies, handbooks and sets of rules which have been put together so we don't hurt ourselves. We know they are there, but may not be using them. It is easier to rely on our subconscious habits. Being aware of and breaking out of those habits can save you chronic pain, or potentially more serious long-term problems.

To cut a very complex science down to a few basics, below are useful tips to remember when using a desktop computer, laptop or tablet device. These only cover neck and back strain. More information is available online on keyboard heights and other body strain issues.

- Keep alignment in mind. Your back, neck and head should be as straight as possible, at all times. If you stay aligned, you are not fatiguing and stressing your spine. If your shoulders aren't relaxed, your position is wrong.
- Have lumbar support on chairs. Make sure your chair is the correct height for your desk.
- The top third of your computer screen should be level with your eyes. iMacs have screens which adjust up and down easily. Similar set-ups make it simple to move the screen whatever your height, or if you need to stand up. That will save you crouching down to read the screen.
- If you need to repeat tasks over and over, make sure you take frequent breaks or alternate tasks, so you can get up and move without feeling you are wasting time.
- Don't sit in awkward postures for more than a very, very short time.
- Use laptop risers and iPad stands which conform to the rules above. If you are unable to, or still find your neck aches when using mobile devices, minimize their use and/or take frequent breaks.
- If you need to use paper documents as you work, a document holder which is attached to your monitor, or free-standing, may decrease neck strain as you aren't looking up and down repeatedly. Even slightly bending your back and neck can create pain at the end of the day. It is repetition which creates the strain.
- Learn to touch type so you need to look at the keyboard less.
- Software companies make programs which will pop up on your screen, reminding you it is time to stretch, move and give your eyes a break. That will also help your spinal joints.

Household Maintenance and Back Strain

Whatever type of accommodation you have, the everyday tasks of cleaning, cooking, taking care of your home and being organized can cause repetitive strain on your back and neck. Many of us have a routine, or to-do list which we work through because we must. We tend to complete the same tasks the same way, not noticing that we are over-reaching, picking up objects which are too heavy or are twisting our backs too much. The less we like the task, or the more tired we are; the more likely it is that we'll get our job list done the wrong way, risking injury.

Consider these common weekly tasks and how heavy or strenuous they are to your back:

- Changing sheets on beds, which can involve lifting mattresses.
- Carrying baskets of wet or dry laundry; or putting wet blankets onto clotheslines.
- Grocery shopping.
- Moving buckets of water when cleaning.
- Hand watering, or shifting pot plants.
- Struggling with heavy items in over-crowded cupboards.
- Carrying equipment such as vacuum cleaners, gardening tools and other moderately heavy, but awkward items.
- Garden and lawn maintenance tasks.
- Moving ladders, buckets, boxes or anything involved in heavy maintenance or do-it-yourself home improvement jobs.
- Twisting to get objects out of the back seat of cars.
- Lifting prams, strollers, wheelchairs or anything in and out of car trunks (or boots.)
- Moving garbage bins.



The list is far more extensive than that. Add in how many of these tasks you do at work and that is a week of heavy back and neck strain. Your best option is to work on becoming more aware of what you are doing, and take steps to avoid the strain as much as possible.

- Stop and plan what you are about to do. How can I do this and be safe?
- Should I ask someone to help me?
- Bend your knees instead of your spine.
- Make sure you keep your back as straight as you can when you lift.
- Keep whatever you are lifting or moving close to your body, keeping the centre of gravity as close to your spine as possible to reduce strain.

Lifting and Caring for Children

If you are a caregiver for a child, you will know how much of a toll lifting them takes on your back. Lifting children involves the same techniques that you use to lift any weight. They need to be still and you need to ensure you're not repeatedly twisting, straining and over-reaching when you are holding their weight. This is not an easy thing to accomplish, but it will save you pain.

If you are picking a child up off the floor, you need to start from a crouched position where you are at their level. While not directly relating to children, this diagram is again, helpful in demonstrating this technique of bending your knees and attaining an upright position slowly.



While you are lifting, be aware of what you're doing:

- Avoid arching your back.
- Get a tight grip on the child. Calm them down first if needed. If they are being difficult, it may be worth waiting until they are more cooperative.
- Keep the child close to your body and your back straight.
- Lift slowly and smoothly without jerking.
- Carry the weight of the child between your shoulder and your waist. Don't take hold of them in a dangling position with your arms outstretched and your back bent.

The Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers Inc. (OHCOW), has an excellent resource for parents and childcare workers on how to lift children in a variety of situations. The brochure has moved around their site several times, so if you cannot locate it at the link below, please search for "Lifting Children Safely" on their website.

The current brochure link is: <http://www.ohcow.on.ca/uploads/Resource/General%20Handouts/Lifting%20Children%20Safely.pdf>

Spine Safe Sport and Recreation

Issues such as overall fitness and obesity have a major impact on how well your spine copes with the daily demands you place on it. Obviously, it is good for you to exercise and enjoy recreational activities, which burn calories and increase bone and muscular strength. The trouble comes in identifying how much is too much, or what exercises and movements are damaging.

If you do your research, there are many differing opinions on what exercises or movements are or are not safe. With some, it appears that whether or not you can hurt yourself, depends on how you use certain pieces of say, gym equipment. The Smith Machine in gyms is an excellent example of that controversy.

As this issue is so complex and extends into so many areas, I am going to suggest basic overall advice: do your homework and do it well, *before* you engage in these activities. Tell your trainer, coach or captain about health issues you already have and ensure your activity takes these into account.

It's also critical to seek medical advice from physiotherapists and doctors when engaging in any activity which you can feel is causing you strain, or worries you. I have heard countless stories of coaches and gym instructors who feel that pushing people that little bit harder is the correct way to go. If you are at risk for an injury or have had one, it may not be the correct way to go at all.

Again, I am emphasizing, for your safety, please seek professional medical advice based on your individual circumstances.

Back Saving Water-Wise Gardening

In many parts of the world, summer comes with water restrictions so the dam doesn't run dry. This is hard on your back! Our gardens are a great investment in the environment, local wildlife and our own enjoyment of our space. However, in times of drought, carrying buckets and dishes of water from the house to the garden is very hard work on your back. The additional strain over time can result in an injury. So how can you keep your garden alive without hurting yourself?

Firstly, reduce the amount of water you need to put on the garden. Stick your finger in the soil first and see if water is actually needed. If rain is forecast, hold off watering unless your plants are stressed and let nature do the job. Using mulch, peat moss and compost will help prevent your plants and soil from drying out. Not allowing grass to grow right up to the base of trees, will cut down on both the trees and grass competing for the same water supply. Drip irrigation and soaker hoses can be used, when allowed by Local Government restrictions, to get water straight to the roots of your plants. Watering to the root system helps prevent disease problems.

Consider reducing your number of pot plants too. They need much more water than plants in your garden beds. Soil additives such as water crystals can help reduce the amount of water they need. Try simple water saving tricks such as placing decorative pebbles or bark on top of pot plant soil, so they don't dry out as quickly.

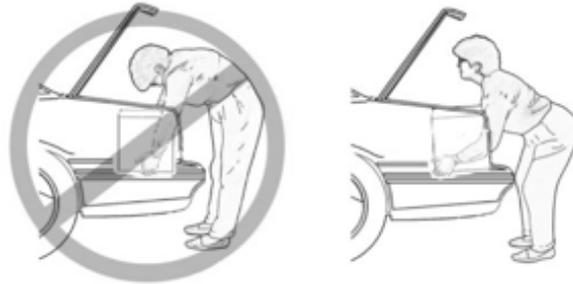
Many gardens are over watered. Watering the garden, particularly on hot summer evenings, is a pleasant job so we tend to overdo it. This teaches our plants to be dependent on us for their needs, rather than putting their roots down deeper and tapping into their own resources. Have a look at the garden beds in public areas. They are rarely ever maintained, yet they survive, except in the toughest times. Gradually cut back on how much water you give your garden over a steady period of time and see what it really needs. Signs of heat stress such as wilting, brown leaf edges or losing leaves will soon let you know if you have cut back too much. Your lawn will cry out by looking brown and becoming brittle. Plants which are newly planted or not properly established (under two years old) will need more water than the older parts of your garden, so watch for signs that they need a little special treatment.

It will also help if you stop and think before you do anything that could stress your back and/or neck. Is that dish of water too awkward to keep picking up off the floor? Would a taller bucket with handles do a better job? Is it just too heavy when full? Should you empty it more often to reduce back strain?

Also, don't forget the other gardening jobs such as moving pots, lifting bags of soil or fertilizer, bending over pulling out weeds or moving a full wheelbarrow. What are you doing to your back? It could be a wise move to ask for help with any gardening task and make it a fun, two person job which will give you even greater joy in your garden.

Avoiding Back Strain While Packing and Moving

In our family, December's arrival was always greeted by the pleasure of getting set-up for Christmas. From an early age, I remember my parents dragging long, heavy boxes out of the roof cavity of our house, then bending over them for several hours pulling out the inevitably tangled sentimental bits and pieces. Every year, three quarters of the way through, mum and dad collapsed and let us finish up. They were exhausted. It was heavy work. That wasn't the end of the hard labor during the summer holidays. After a short break in front of the cricket, it was time to pack the car and go to visit the relatives. That required cramming the car full of lead-weight suitcases and boxes.



I always wondered why dad got so grumpy. I knew he had a 'bad back,' but as a kid, you don't really understand what that's all about. I realize now that he was in a great deal of pain. Like so many of us, he had never taken care of his back. He had trouble with his spinal discs; Spondylitis (inflammatory arthritis of the spine); spinal nerve root damage and acutely strained back muscles. It was all from years of poor lifting habits. Over time, Dad's back problems rendered him unemployable and the family was financially crippled. The stresses that arose from living with someone in severe pain were equally as devastating.

Christmas and the summer holidays are a trying time of the year, as we, like my father, try to fit in all the 'have-to' tasks. Taking care of your back is easily lost in the rush. However, the pain and strain from lifting shopping, storage boxes, luggage and recreational gear won't be so easily lost. No matter what you want to do, if you have damaged your spine, it won't hesitate to speak up!

To avoid year long consequences from back strain, try these tips for keeping your back in the best shape.

- Stop and plan what you are about to do. How can I do this and be safe?
- Should I ask someone to help me?
- Bend your knees instead of your spine.
- Keep your back straight.

Taking Care of Your Back After Corrective Surgery: A Cautionary Tale

As a small child I was diagnosed as having Scoliosis, then in my early teens I endured three major corrective surgeries. Once I got into my twenties and had no further problems, I all but forgot about my spine. I felt reassured by my massive, rock solid spinal fusion. What could go wrong?

I discovered the hard way there was plenty! Around my fortieth birthday I ruptured a cervical disc. The pain was totally overwhelming. I couldn't even endure sitting up and my life suddenly stopped. To my horror, I was back on the operating table. It was the kind of nightmare I had never bargained on having to face again! After the surgeries for Scoliosis, I didn't want to know my spine existed. I always had some back pain, but was told it was just muscular, get used to it. So I did. That meant that I ignored every warning sign that something else may be slowly going wrong.

Because I was fused, I felt immune to the back problems I saw other people around me having. I did everything wrong: lifting and moving heavy or awkward objects incorrectly; sitting in a fixed position for way too long; dealing with pain by staying still; ignoring the posture I could control and sleeping in bad positions. Not only did it contribute over time to doing that disc in, it also created a lot of additional muscular pain I didn't need or want.

Obviously, now I try to think twice about what I do to avoid further damage. I have studied hard to make sure I know what to do to take care of myself. I have also taken the time to make sure I now understand more about my Scoliosis and it's long term implications for my health.

Now I am watchful that there is enough calcium in my diet to prevent osteoporosis and degrade my fusion's strength. I ensure I do easy exercise to build better bones and keep all my spinal structures that can move, mobile and healthy. Safe lifting and carrying techniques, such as those I found on the Lift Smart Australia web site, are easy to remember and have given me a lot of help. As much as I would prefer to forget it again, I now make sure my spine now gets top priority in being taken care of!

When you've been through major medical problems it is natural to want to shut yourself off from that part of your life. That is equally as unhealthy as letting everything you do be ruled by what went wrong. It pays to be aware of what you're doing that could create problems in the future and act safely. Taking care of your spine is a life-long process, regardless of whether you have Scoliosis or not. Believe me, it is worth having the bravery to face it.

Back Care for Carers

Whether you care for a family member, or work with an organization that cares for people in the community, being a carer is one of the most important roles you can take on. It has both its rewards and challenges. One of the key challenges is trying to balance caring in a manner that is friendly and comfortable for the caree, while at the same time, paying attention to your back health and safety.

No one wants to live in a cold, institutional environment. It is natural as a carer to want to make the caring process more human by maximizing physical contact and avoiding having a house full of lifting equipment. The reality is that if you neglect safety, the long-term effects are detrimental to both you and your caree. Not only can you hurt yourself, you can also unwittingly injure them.

Commonly repeated tasks such as getting your caree too and from the bathroom; in and out of chairs or cars; rolling them over in bed or getting them dressed; put constant strain on both your back and theirs if done incorrectly. Over time, the accumulative damage will cause serious problems. The stress and disruption of that damage can take a greater toll on you than the discomfort of getting used to proper lifting procedures, or the intrusion of a hoist, or other mechanical means of lifting or shifting your caree's weight.

There are Community Services available which are there to support you and help prevent you and your caree from getting hurt. For example, Occupational Therapists. These Services will come to you and see exactly what you are doing. From that they will be able to tailor practical, realistic solutions to your specific situation, to make life as easy and safe as possible for everybody.

As you carry out your daily tasks as a carer, please be aware and take the time to consider these points.

- Stop and plan what you are about to do.
- Should I ask someone to help me?
- Bend your knees instead of your spine.
- Keep your back straight, especially your lower back, when you lift.
- Keep whatever/whoever you are lifting or moving close to your body.
- Keep the centre of gravity as close to your spine as possible to reduce strain.

Back Care for Wheelchair Users

Living an active life with a disability can be frustrating. The last thing you need is additional problems with your back. With a little care and thought as to what you are doing, back injuries can be avoided.

When most of what you do is from a sitting position, many everyday tasks can be causing you back strain you are not even aware of. Injury doesn't just come from obvious high-risk activities such as transfers, lifting heavy objects or getting wheelchairs in and out of vehicles. Back injuries commonly come from minor strains accumulating over time, not just from one bad lift or over-stretch. Progressive damage can be done while picking dropped items up off the floor; lifting bags and boxes from an uncomfortable height; or performing basic household tasks such as taking laundry out of a washing machine or dryer. Doing all these things while sitting makes it much harder to reach, lift and move objects and increases the risk of damaging your back.

Throughout our lives, our ligaments lose elasticity and the intervertebral discs become flatter, more brittle and prone to rupture. The greater strain that is placed on these structures, the sooner damage can occur. Disc and ligament damage can result in spinal stenosis. This is a condition in which the spinal nerve roots are compressed causing pain, numbness and tingling in whichever part of your body is serviced by that particular root. It can also cause spondylolisthesis, where one vertebrae slips over another, causing the same symptoms as spinal stenosis.

In addition to the complications caused by the sitting position, paralysis of the lower limbs can also result in reduced muscle tone in the abdominal muscles. Ideally, the abdominal muscles should take the strain of any lift, rather than the muscles in your back. Lifting using the abdominal muscles stabilizes the spine, producing less muscle fatigue and giving you more energy for the lift. If the back muscles take the strain, the muscles have to work harder, requiring more effort to lift the object. Greater force is then placed on the joints of the spine. Over time, this leads to disease and pain.

As well as injury severely limiting your activities and reducing your independence, the pain that comes from physical stress and injury can cause anxiety and depression. Avoiding all these problems makes taking good care of your back worthwhile. Injury can be avoided with thought and planning. Below are helpful guidelines for lessening the strain you place on your back, as you go about your daily activities. They are relevant to everything you do, whether or not you think of these activities as light or heavy.

Before you lift: plan your approach:

- Test the object before you lift to see how heavy it is. Is it too much to handle?
- Make sure the load is stable and won't shift.
- Even if you have the strength to lift, if the item is heavy or awkward, get help.

While you are lifting, be aware of what you're doing:

- Avoid arching your back and reaching above your head for an object.
- Get a tight grip on what you want to carry.

- Keep the item close to your body and your back straight.
- Lift slowly and smoothly without jerking.
- Carry the weight of the load between your shoulder and your waist.

You may also find it helpful to organize your home, so that what you need is close to where you need to use it and within easy reach. If you share your home with others, discuss the reasons why things are to be put back where they need to be. Occupational Therapists can give you advice and recommend independent living aids which help reduce back strain. It is worthwhile asking for help before you run into trouble.

Special Chapter for Young Carers

Many children and teenagers also take on the important job of caring for a loved one in their family. This next chapter has been written specially for them.

As being a carer is so important, need to be as fit and healthy as you can be. It isn't just for the benefit of the special person you are caring for, but also so you can get the most out of your life. One of the parts of your body that does the most work as a carer is your back. If you damage your back, it can cause you serious problems that will seriously limit what you can do. Back pain will also make you tired and miserable.

As you rely on your back so much, it needs special consideration so it can keep you on the move. Your back is an amazing series of moveable parts which bend and move to give you maximum flexibility. All the muscles, bones, discs and ligaments work together to allow you to do all the daily tasks you carry out.

You don't just suddenly hurt your back by lifting something too heavy, though that can happen. It is lifting and twisting the wrong way repeatedly that does damage over time. Just because you don't feel pain now, doesn't mean you aren't contributing to major problems that will show up later. The best way to avoid trouble is to learn how to lift and move properly.

High-risk activities for hurting your back include:

- Lifting heavy loads around the house such as laundry baskets and groceries.
- Lifting wheelchairs, walkers and other awkward equipment: an object doesn't have to be heavy to hurt you. Even if it is light, if you find it hard to grasp and move without bending and twisting, it can strain your back.
- Moving people on and off chairs, beds, in and out of cars, and around the bathroom.

Taking good care of yourself and your back includes getting enough sleep, enjoyable exercise such as walking; keeping your weight down to keep the load off your back; giving up smoking and getting help when you need it!

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Online Back Care Resources

- Spine-Health : <http://www.spine-health.com/>
- Safe Lifting Portal : <http://www.safeliftingportal.com/>
- Spine Universe : <http://www.spineuniverse.com/>
- North American Spine Society : <http://www.spine.org/>
- Big Back Pain.com : <http://www.bigbackpain.com/>
- Arthritis Research & Therapy : <http://arthritis-research.com/>
- National Back Exchange : <http://www.nationalbackexchange.org/>
- Arthritis Australia : <http://www.arthritisaustralia.com.au/>
- Mature Spine : <http://www.maturespine.com/>
- Back.com : <http://www.back.com/>

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About the Author

Cate Russell-Cole is a fully qualified and experienced Educator, Journalist and Social Worker. She has been researching, writing and teaching her own courses since 1990, and now coaches online and authors e-books. Her most successful course to date is "Write Your Life Story." Cate's creativity and writing coaching has attracted thriving communities on the Internet, which Cate maintains weekly to provide resources and inspiration. In addition to working online, Cate also teaches locally through both the Government and private training providers.

Other Publications by Cate Russell-Cole

- Write Your Life Story E-Course
- Unleashing Your Creative Spirit E-Course
- Prayer Journal Workshop
- Creating and Resolving Conflict in Fiction (Four Dimensional Characterisation Series)
- Building Emotionally Realistic Characters (Four Dimensional Characterisation Series)
- Phoenix Rising: Conquering the Stresses of the Writer's Life
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