

## Oh, My Aching Back

**H**ealth experts say 80 percent of Americans will suffer from debilitating back trouble at some time in their lives — and a lot of that pain comes from sitting at a desk eight or more hours a day. But the good news is that much of the agony is avoidable.

America wasn't always a nation of bad backs. The incidence of back pain has risen 40 percent since 1970, says Scott W. Donkin, a Lincoln, Neb., chiropractor. Why 1970? That's when the work force shifted from the factory to the office, and Americans sat down en masse. Today most of us spend more time sitting than we do standing or even sleeping.

The problem is that our bodies weren't designed for so much



sitting. "The human body was engineered for activity and movement," says Donkin, who wrote *Sitting on the Job* (1989, Houghton Mifflin). "In the typical sitting posture, the pelvis has a tendency to rock backward and the forward curve of your lower back becomes flat, and that increases the pressure of the disks between the vertebrae as much as 50 percent. Staying in the same position for a long time compounds the pressure."

When you add the muscle tension that comes from slumping

over your desk, you've got a sure-fire recipe for an aching back.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Try these tips to get rid of your back pain.

- **A healthy back starts with healthy posture.** Keep your head up, back tall and shoulders relaxed. Pretend there's a string attached to the top of your head, lifting you gently off the ground.

Donkin advises that you sit with your buttocks all the way back into the seat of your chair to take full advantage of your chair's backrest. Your thighs should be parallel to the floor, and the soles of your feet should rest flat on the floor. If your legs dangle, use a low footstool or phone book to prop up your feet. Don't cross your legs at the knee or stick them straight out.

- **Wear low-heeled shoes.** High heels throw the legs and spine out of alignment, which puts added strain on muscles and joints.

- **If you work at a computer, the center of the screen should be at chin level.** When you type, bend your elbows to form perfect right angles, and hold your wrists straight. Bending your elbows more sharply will tire arms quickly, and you'll end up hunching your shoulders to get relief.

- **Arrange the objects on your desk for maximum efficiency.** "Imagine you're an airplane pilot and the workstation is like the cockpit of your airplane," Donkin says. Distribute objects evenly on your desk so you don't rely on only one set of muscles to pick them up. If you're right-handed and write a lot while talking on

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the phone, put the phone on your left side. That way you'll avoid reaching awkwardly across your body. And never wedge the phone receiver between your neck and shoulder as you write. Use a phone cradle instead, or better yet, get a speakerphone.

### Use the Right Equipment

Office-furniture makers now build ergonomic chairs, custom-made to fit people's bodies and the type of work they do. These chairs are expensive, but Donkin says they're worth it. "If an employee with average pay and benefits loses 10 minutes a day in productivity because of back pain, he figures, that equates to about \$400 a year in lost productivity. You could buy a good chair for that amount of money."

What makes a good office chair? Look for these features:

- The backrest should be contoured to fit the curvature of your spine. If your chair doesn't have a built-in lumbar support, put a compact pillow or a tightly rolled bath towel behind your lower back. You can also find back cushions at major car-supply stores.

- The top of the backrest should reach your shoulders to support the entire spinal column.

- Look for a floating-motion backrest, which moves with you as you lean backward to relax or sit upright to work.

- The seat cushion should be resilient but firm. You should sit on your chair, not in it.

- The seat should slope downward at the front edge and curve

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won't feel funny as soon as they start to feel the benefits."

**Stretch-back.** Lean all the way back into your chair's backrest and bring your arms up over your head. At the same time, extend your legs at the hips and flip your feet up and down. Close your eyes and breathe deeply to feel fully refreshed.

**Shoulder rolls.** Shrug your shoulders up toward your ears or roll your shoulders backward and forward in circular motions. Turn your head slowly to one side, then the other, or tilt your head slowly to one shoulder and then the other.

**Leg pulls.** While sitting, pull one knee toward your chest and hold it for five seconds, then do the same with the other leg. Repeat five times for each leg.

**Cat stretch.** (You'll need a couple of minutes for this one.) Stand up and put

your hands on your desk at shoulder width, and plant your feet also at shoulder width. Arch your back slowly like a cat, dropping your head toward your chest while tucking in your pelvis. Hold for two counts. Then bring your lower back down while pushing your buttocks out and raising your head toward the ceiling. Hold for two more counts. Repeat the exercise five to 10 times.

Just because you're stuck in a chair doesn't mean you have to be stuck with a bad back. With a few simple steps, you can put your back pain where it belongs — out the door.

**By Ellen Walterscheid**

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upward at the back. This supports the back and reduces pressure on the thighs.

- Armrests are a must for long-term sitting work. They should be no more than 8 or 9 inches long.

Even the best chair won't do much good, however, if you don't adjust its height to fit your body and your desk. Adjusting the height takes just a few seconds — and your back will thank you for it all day.

### Office Exercises

The best exercises to avoid office back pain are preventive ones. If your abdominal muscles are strong, they'll support the spine like a corset and take the burden off your back muscles. Swimming, biking and cross-country skiing are the best overall strengthening exercises you can do. Even 20 minutes a day of modified sit-ups — knees bent, chin to chest — and pelvic tilts will keep your abdominal and back muscles strong. To do pelvic tilts, lie on your back with knees bent and feet flat on the floor, and push your lower back against the floor. Hold for five counts.

When you're at the office, the best antidote for back pain is to get up and move around a couple of times an hour. Taking a short walk is even better.

But if you're tied to your desk, Donkin recommends the following spot exercises. Try them whenever you feel the muscle tension coming on. People might feel funny doing these, Donkin says, "but they