

A HEALTHY BACK FOR A HEALTHY BODY: TIPS FOR MANAGING BACK PAIN

Many adults who enjoyed active lifestyles when they were younger and healthier find themselves suffering from stiff, painful backs as they age. Life with an aching back can be a miserable experience. Back pain is one of the most common reasons older people visit their doctors for a back exam, diagnosis, pain relief and treatment.

BACK PAIN: RISK FACTORS

Older baseball players, tennis, bowlers and other sports enthusiasts often strain back muscles during a game especially if they don't warm up properly or haven't played in a long time. Stress can cause back muscles to tense up. Smoking has also been linked to chronic back pain. Side effects of certain medications can weaken aging bones.

Other everyday activities that can bring on back pain include:

- Poor posture
- Lack of physical activity
- Being overweight
- Arthritis, knee or back surgery
- Accidents and falls
- Overdoing household chores or yard work,
- Emotional stress and depression that causes tense neck and back muscles
- A family history of back of back pain
- Previous back surgery

BACK PAIN: SYMPTOMS & CAUSES

Chronic back pain can make it painful for an older person to stand for even short periods of time. Your older relative may complain of other symptoms including:

- Aching muscles
- Shooting pain in the legs
- Stiffness or limited flexibility in the back
- Difficulty standing up straight

Osteoporosis is a painful bone disease that increases the risk for fractures in the back of an older person. Although this condition most often occurs in older women, it can also affect older men.

MANAGING BACK PAIN

The good news is that back pain in older adults can often be managed at home with a variety of lifestyle changes and the help and support of their families and health care professionals.

Encourage your older family member to:

- Sleep on a firm mattress
- Schedule regular checkups with the doctor. See the doctor immediately if your parent's back pain becomes worse
- Wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes
- Stop smoking
- Lose weight if he or she is overweight. Extra body weight can stress his or her back and other joints.
- Provide chairs with good lower back support. For additional support add rolled up towel or pillow behind the small of your parent's back
- Serve foods high in vitamin D, calcium fortified foods or a calcium supplement if recommended by the doctor. Limit calories to help your relative maintain a healthy weight

WORKOUTS FOR PAINFUL BACKS

Regular exercise can help reduce your parent's back pain and improve her flexibility, endurance, strength, balance and overall health. Check with her physician before she begins an exercise program – especially if she has other chronic illnesses or has not been physically active. The doctor may also refer your relative to a physical therapist who can plan exercise routines most suited to your parent's condition. Surgery is rarely needed unless standard treatments, home remedies, exercise and physical therapy fail to control painful symptoms.

Keep workout sessions short at first. Activities you both can enjoy include:

- Exploring your neighborhood
- Swimming
- Easy stretching exercises
- Raking leaves, pulling weeds, dusting furniture and other easy house or garden chores
- Shopping excursions
- Visiting a nearby park

BACK PAIN: THE GOOD NEWS

As a family caregiver you can take pride in your ability to care for an older parent or spouse. Unlike many other disorders of older adults, back pain can often be managed successfully at home with the care of family members and expert treatment provided by healthcare professionals. 584/8/10]