



4 Gentle Exercises to Strengthen Your Back and Help Prevent Back Pain

These gentle exercises can help strengthen your back and help prevent back pain.

Like a tired toddler or a whistling tea kettle, your backache nags at you until you give it the attention it deserves. For a sore back, exercise is the last thing on your mind, and that's OK. But once your back is healed, ask your doctor about the protective benefits of exercise.

Start your exercise program

If your doctor gives you the OK to start exercising, begin with a warm-up followed by these gentle back and abdominal exercises:

Cat-cow warm-up. This helps to loosen the joints of the spine and restore flexibility to the spinal muscles and ligaments.

- *Starting position:* Start on all fours, hands and knees on the floor. Knees are hip width apart and hands are below your shoulders, elbows straight but not locked. Look down at the floor.
- *Action 1:* As you exhale, let your head move toward the chest while rounding your back like a cat (spine toward ceiling). Hold for 10 seconds.
- *Action 2:* As you inhale, slowly yield to gravity. Let your stomach move toward the floor (arching lower back) while allowing your shoulder blades to move together. Hold for 10 seconds. Alternate between the two positions.

Birdog. This exercise is good for the upper and lower back and hamstrings (muscles in back of thigh). It is a good follow-up after the cat-cow warm-up.

- *Starting position:* On all fours, hands and knees on floor.
- *Action:* Extend one leg and the opposite arm so that they are parallel to the floor. Hold this position for seven to eight seconds, and then repeat with the opposite arm and leg.

Pelvic tilt. You can do this exercise alone to isolate your lower back or in sequence with the warm-up and other exercises. Do it on the floor or firm surface.

- *Starting position:* Lie on your back with your knees bent, feet flat on the floor. Leave a space between the small of your back and the floor.
- *Action:* Tighten your abdominal muscles so that the small of the back presses flat against the floor. Hold this position for five or six seconds then relax, allowing a space again between the small of your back and the floor. Repeat three times and gradually increase to 10 repetitions.

Abdominal contractions. This helps to build abdominal muscles, which support and protect the lower back.

- *Starting position:* Lie on your back with knees bent, feet flat on the floor with hands resting on the abdomen below ribs.

- *Action:* Tighten abdominal muscles while pulling the abdomen in and down. Continue to breathe while holding the contraction for five seconds. Relax, then repeat 10 times.

Does aerobic exercise help the back?

Yes. Aerobic exercises - like walking, biking or swimming - use a lot of oxygen. They keep the heart pumping, work large muscle groups and keep the back strong. Try walking during your lunch break, biking with your family or going for a swim. These types of activities are endurance exercises. They can help improve blood flow to the back and strengthen and relax the back muscles without jarring them.

Isn't a little pain ok when exercising the back?

The "no pain, no gain" mantra has no place here. If you have significant pain before or during the exercises, that's your body's definite signal that this is something you should avoid.

What are some other ways to prevent back pain?

- Avoid sitting for long periods.
- Stand up at intervals while talking on the phone.
- Walk the aisles during long flights.
- During long car rides, stop from time to time to walk around and stretch.
- Lose weight. Carrying extra weight, especially in the abdominal region, can throw off your body off balance and place added stress on the back.
- Avoid smoking. It is a risk factor for degenerative disc disease, a major cause of back pain.