

Leave back pain behind

MHealthy
Neck and
Upper Back
Self-Care



MHealthy.umich.edu/backcare



Neck and upper back care

Welcome!

MHealthy has created this neck and upper back care booklet for people who are in the early weeks of neck and upper back pain.

We encourage you to go through the booklet to understand the causes of your pain, and how to care for your neck and upper back. The good news is that there are many simple things you can do to feel better.



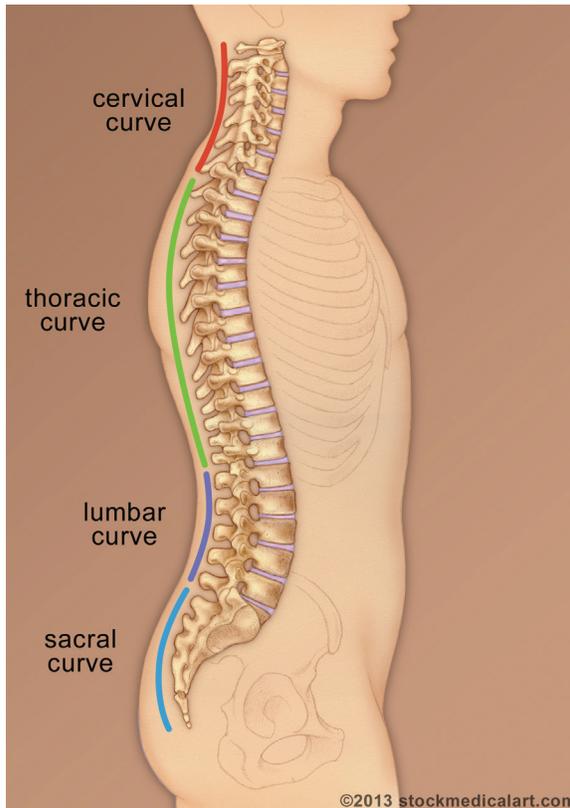
150 minutes

Most healthy adults need 2 hours and 30 minutes (150 minutes) of moderate-intensity aerobic activity each week to get the most health benefits.



Spine Basics

Your spine does a lot of work! It holds up your head, shoulders, and upper body. It supports you so you can stand up, but also helps you bend and twist. It also protects the spinal cord. Your spine has four main curves that help you keep your balance and stand straight. The lowest part of the spine connects to the sacrum, a bone that fits between the two hip bones.



The spine is made of bones (vertebrae) that are stacked on top of each other with disks (intervertebral disks) in between them. When you walk or run, the disks act like a cushion and keep the bones from bumping into each other. The vertebrae attach to each other with joints and ligaments. This allows your spine to rotate, and bend backward, forward, and side to side. Muscles, tendons and ligaments support your back and help you move. Nerves carry messages between your brain and your muscles.

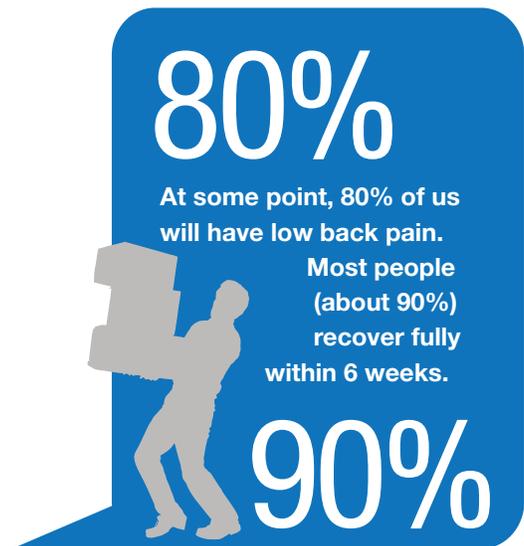
About neck and upper back pain

Causes of Pain

Some likely reasons of neck and upper back pain are:

- Strained muscles
- Sprained ligaments
- Tight or locked joints
- Small tears in the disks

Whatever the cause, neck and upper back pain is usually treated the same way: keep moving but limit repetitive body movements, by alternating tasks, take occasional breaks as needed, apply ice (or heat if ice doesn't help), and take non-prescription pain relievers if necessary and approved by your doctor.



Should I see a doctor?



Call your doctor right away if you have:

- Weakness, numbness, or tingling in your arms or legs
- Constant or intense pain
- Had an injury to your neck or upper back
- Pain with associated ringing of the ear, double vision or difficulty in swallowing.

Fortunately, you can reduce your risk of neck or upper back pain and improve your overall health. You have the power to change some back pain risk factors

Risk factors

Risk factors that you can change:



Use safer posture, reduce force and repetition

The way you position your body when you're working or doing everyday tasks can affect your risk of experiencing neck and/or upper back pain. Bending, twisting, pushing, pulling, repetitive tasks, staying in the same position for long periods of time, and whole-body vibration are all risk factors for neck and upper back pain. Take breaks and try to change your position frequently so you aren't in the same position for a long period of time (see posture pointers).



Quit smoking

People who smoke are at a slightly higher risk for back pain. Researchers have a few possible explanations. One is that nicotine slows the flow of blood to the vertebrae and disks. This affects how the tissue functions, and may trigger back pain. Smokers tend to lose bone faster than nonsmokers. This puts them at greater risk of osteoarthritis.

If you're considering quitting, we want to help. Learn about MHealthy's tobacco treatment programs at MHealthy.umich.edu/tobacco.



Stretching



Stretching is an important part of exercising, but it also makes everyday things like putting on your socks a little easier. Stretching can help to reduce stiffness and pain, and can increase your range of motion. It's easy to do; you can even stretch while you're watching TV or reading. Warm up with a few minutes of walking or other gentle activity before you stretch.

Below are some of the recommended stretches for your neck and upper torso. You will need a foam roller or thick rolled towel for two of the stretches outlined below.

Foam rollers (36 x 6 round) can be purchased for approximately \$22 online or at most athletic stores.



Chin Tuck

Sitting or Standing

- Sit tall.
- Bring your chin straight back, as if making a double chin. Do not let your head move up or down, just back.
- Pause and return to starting position.

Repeat one to two times.



Neck Stretch

Sitting

- Grab hold of the bottom of your chair with your left hand.
- Lean your body forward from your anchored hand.
- Tilt your head forward and away from your left hand while looking down at your right hip.
- Hold this position for 30 seconds, then relax.

Repeat one to two times.

Repeat on other side.

Chest and Upper Extremity Stretch



- Stand facing a wall. Reach your right hand straight out to the side, and plant your right palm firmly on the wall.
- Maintain this position as your feet turn fully around so they are parallel to the wall.
- Keeping your right shoulder down, slowly turn your chest further around to the left, opening the chest and feeling a stretch in the front of the right shoulder.
- Then gently lift fingers off the wall.
- You will feel a stretch from your chest to your arm, forearm and fingertips.

Hold for 30 seconds, Repeat one to two times. Repeat with left arm.

Chest Stretch



Standing by Doorway

- Stand in a doorway with one foot forward through the door and one foot behind you. Place both forearms flat on sides of the doorway.
- Bend your front knee forward through the door while also moving your chest through the door until you feel a gentle stretch in your chest.
- Keep your chest up and your chin down.

Hold for 30 seconds. Repeat one to two times.



Neck Side Stretch

Sitting or Standing

- Place a belt at the bottom of your neck on your left side
- While holding onto both ends of the belt, place the right end of the belt under your right arm.
- Anchor the belt under your right arm.
- Pull the left side of the belt down and forward with your left hand until you feel a gentle stretch down the left side of your neck.
- Bend your head to the right side.

Hold for 30 seconds. Repeat one to two times. Repeat on right side.



Thoracic Elongation

Sitting

- Sit at the edge of your chair facing close to a wall.
- Place your forearm and elbows on the wall with your palms together forming a triangle.
- Place your forehead on the wall between your forearms.
- With your low back flat, try to press your chest towards the floor elongating your upper back.

Hold for 30 seconds. Repeat one to two times.



Thoracic Mobilization



With Foam Roller

- Sit on the floor and place the foam roller behind you, perpendicular to your spine.
- Lean your forearms on the roller and lower your mid back onto the foam roller.
- Place your hands behind your head and neck, keeping your elbows close together to support your neck.
- Start with the roller in the middle of your back/lower rib cage. Keep your buttocks on the floor and back bent slightly.
- Move the foam roller up your spine about one inch at a time. End at the upper shoulder blade region then slowly return to starting position.

Hold for 30 seconds. Repeat one to two times.

Snow Angels



Lying Down with Foam Roller

- Lie lengthwise on the foam roller, with both your head and your buttocks fully supported by the foam roller.
- Let your arms rest out to your side, palms up.
- Keep the back of your hands in contact with the floor, slide your arms overhead as far as possible, making a “snow angel”, then return to starting position. If you are too tight for this, gradually move your arms overhead as you are able.

Repeat 8-10 times.

Find relief

There are a number of simple strategies you can try at home to help relieve your pain, if you don't have any of the warning signs listed under "Should I see a doctor?" If your neck or upper back isn't feeling better after a few days, ask your doctor to explore other options.

X-Rays, MRIs, or CT scans are rarely needed for back pain. Neither is surgery. The problem often goes away on its own after a few days of light activity.



Try these first

Treatment	Does it Work?
Ice/cold packs	<p>Sometimes, and it's worth a try. Try using a cold pack (or a bag of frozen peas) at the first sign of a backache. Ice helps to stop muscle spasms, reduce inflammation, and calm the nerves sending pain signals to your brain. You can switch between a cold pack and a heating pad if you find it helpful.</p> <p><i>Use a damp towel between your skin and the cold pack. Don't use a cold pack for longer than 15 to 20 minutes at a time.</i></p>
Heat	<p>Sometimes, but try ice first. Heat might make inflammation worse at first. If ice doesn't help, you can try heat. Use a heating pad, heated blankets, or even a hot shower.</p> <p><i>Don't use a heating pad for more than 15 to 20 minutes or fall asleep while using one.</i></p>
Limit repetitive motion	<p>Limit time spent doing repetitive upper body movements and/or take occasional breaks to give your neck and upper body time to recover.</p>

Need a referral from your physician

Treatment	Does it Work?
Physical Therapy	<p>Yes. If your pain lasts for more than 4-6 weeks, your doctor may suggest a visit to a physical therapist.</p>

Posture pointers

Poor posture makes your muscles and ligaments struggle to keep you balanced—which can lead to fatigue, back pain, headaches, and other problems. You may not be able to prevent every episode of back pain, but being mindful of how you move your body helps to keep your spine strong and stable.

Follow these tips and your back will thank you.

SITTING

- ✓ Sit up tall
- ✓ Keep your feet flat on the floor or on a footrest
- ✓ Hips should be even or slightly higher than your knees
- ✓ Place a small pillow or folded towel at the curve of your lower back, if needed
- ✓ Adjust your chair height so that your eyes are near the top of your monitor
- ✓ If the chair back is concave for you, add a rolled towel or thin pillow vertically between your shoulder blades so that you can sit tall with support.
- ✓ Move items close to you instead of reaching for them.
- ✓ Position reading /writing materials where you can see them while keeping your head tall.
- ✓ When using a laptop, tilt it up about 2 inches in the back to raise the monitor, while typing with your wrists straight and using a separate mouse.
- ✓ Position your ears above shoulders above hips, and use a gentle chin tuck.

DO



DON'T



- ✗ Slouch
- ✗ Sit for more than 60 minutes

Stretch every

30-60 minutes

STANDING

- ✓ Keep your ears, shoulders, hips, and ankles in line with each other
- ✓ Relax your shoulders
- ✓ Put your weight on the middle of your feet, not on your toes or heels, and shift from one foot to the other
- ✓ Adjust your work surface to elbow height
- ✓ Position reading/writing materials where you can see them keeping your head tall.
- ✓ Move items close to you to minimize reach.

DO



DON'T



- ✗ Slouch
- ✗ Stand for a long time without changing positions
- ✗ Wear high heels or shoes without proper support

Rest one foot on a
1-2 inch high box or inside a cabinet door

LIFTING & CARRYING

- ✓ Hold items close to your body at elbow height
- ✓ Bend at hips and knees
- ✓ Keep your back straight
- ✓ Lift slowly
- ✓ Turn your feet to change directions
- ✓ Move heavy storage to elbow height and lighten the load if possible.
- ✓ Limit overhead storage to lightweight and small items.
- ✓ Use a safe step stool if needed to limit overhead and far reach.
- ✓ Push instead of pull items when you are able.
- ✓ When carrying items, balance the load near your midline using both arms.

DO



DON'T



- ✗ Bend at the waist
- ✗ Lock your knees
- ✗ Twist
- ✗ Reach with your arms

Ask for help with
heavy items or use carts or hand trucks and always push instead of pull

DRIVING

- ✓ Sit high and close to the steering wheel
- ✓ Adjust your seat so that your knees are bent and slightly lower than your hips
- ✓ Set the lumbar rest or use a rolled up towel to have a slight inward curve in your lower back
- ✓ Move often
- ✓ If the chair back is concave or pushes your head forward, add a rolled towel or thin pillow vertically between your shoulder blades so that you can sit tall. Avoid leaning to one side.
- ✓ Relax your arms, neck and jaw while driving.
- ✓ Position your ears above shoulders above hips with your chin level with the floor.

DO



DON'T



- ✗ Drive in the same position for a long time
- ✗ Sit far away from the wheel or pedals

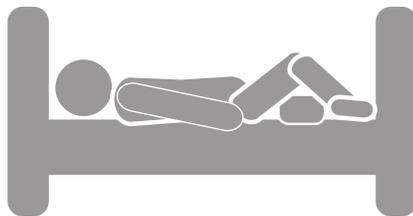
Try to take breaks at least

once an hour on long trips

SLEEPING

- ✓ Use a comfortable mattress
- ✓ Put a pillow between your legs if you sleep on your side or under your knees if you sleep on your back
- ✓ Use a thin pillow so that your neck is straight, and you can roll a hand towel under the curve in your neck
- ✓ If sleeping on your back: place your arms straight along your sides.
- ✓ If sleeping on your side: place one arm along the top leg, and allow a slight bend in your elbows
- ✓ If sleeping on your stomach: roll over to sleep on your back or your side

DO



DON'T



- ✗ Sleep on a sagging mattress

The average person spends

1/3 of his life

sleeping. Using a back-friendly position is very important for your health





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