A partnership of patients, family members, and providers that promotes the voice of the patient, innovation, and optimization of the care experience for all.

Prevent Low Back Pain with Activity and Exercise

You can decrease your risk of back pain by doing exercises to increase your strength and flexibility.

Introduction

After an episode of back pain is over, you can take steps to reduce your risk of future episodes. While you are not likely to eliminate all future episodes, improving general fitness and doing basic back exercises can decrease the number of times your back pain flares up, and make each episode less severe.

Improve Your General Physical Fitness

Focus on activities that can strengthen your back and improve its flexibility. Physical exercise is not only good for building muscles, improving flexibility, and losing weight, it’s also good for your heart, bones, and your general sense of wellbeing!

Physical activities that are good for your back include:

- Swimming or walking in a pool
- Stationary bicycling
- Walking and jogging

Make sure to wear comfortable shoes that provide good support. Avoid intense activity that hurts your back; any exercise is better than none at all. Your goal should be to exercise at least 3 times a week for at least 30 minutes. Whatever you can do will help. The key is to choose something you enjoy and to fit it into your routine, so you’ll stick to it.

Basic Low Back Exercises

Specific exercises for the back, such as those that strengthen stomach muscles or increase flexibility, are also helpful. Back stretching and strengthening exercises help to tone your back and stomach muscles, and make them more flexible. Be sure to do these exercises the right way, and stop doing any exercise that causes pain. Following are some basic exercises you can do to help prevent low back pain.

1. Both knees bending

Lie on your back with knees bent, feet on floor. Clasp hands behind both thighs and bring both knees toward chest as far as comfortable. Hold for a count of 3 to 5, then return to the starting position. Repeat 5 times or as recommended.

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Health Coaching

Working with a Health Coach at the APF is different from working with a personal trainer or a nutritionist. Coaches take a non-prescriptive approach, and are collaborative and co-creative partners in your health efforts. This means they will not tell you what to do or in which direction to go. Instead, the coaches will work with you to determine the health and wellness goals that are most important to you. Then, they will help you take steps to reach those goals.

Diabetes Management Tool

To help you on your health journey, we now offer access to a diabetes management mobile application. This tool will give you feedback and guidance to support your diabetes management plan. It is available at no cost to you for one year. If you have a smartphone and wish to take advantage of this resource, please call the practice to learn more or to set up a 30-minute consult with one of our health coaches.
2. Leg stretching
Lie on back, knees bent with feet flat on the floor. Wrap hands behind left thigh and clasp. Slowly bring left leg toward chest with knee bent. Then gradually begin to straighten left knee so that foot is raise up as high as comfortable without over-stretching muscles behind the leg. Return left leg to starting position and repeat 5 times. Repeat exercise with right leg. Do 5 times or as recommended.

3. Stomach strengthening
Lie on back, hands across chest, knees slightly bent and feet flat on the floor. Lift head and shoulders 2 to 4 inches off floor until you feel tightening in stomach muscles. Hold 3 to 5 seconds. Repeat 5 times or as recommended.

4. Back stretching
a. Begin on hands and knees. Then sag the back towards the floor while leaning forward at the same time. Hold briefly.

b. Then begin arching back while leaning back so that the buttocks move towards the back of the feet. Move back and forth in a similar pattern 5 times or as recommended.

Other Prevention Activities
Other ways to prevent future back pain include wearing shoes that provide good support and comfort when walking. If your job involves a lot of lifting, back supports may help, though being physically fit is probably even more important. Finally, if you have many severe episodes of low back pain, it’s a good idea to work with a physical therapist to develop an exercise program especially for you. This kind of work takes time and costs money. So, think about whether you are ready to stick with it before you start.

Summary
You can do a lot to control your low back pain. The key is to start when you don’t have pain, and focus on things you can do to prevent the next episode or decrease its severity.

The good news is that there are simple, effective ways to prevent low back pain. These exercises and activities will also improve the way you feel every day and contribute to your good health in general.

This article is adapted from MGH/PCOI “Activity and exercise to help you prevent low back pain,” which can be found in the Resources section of Patient Gateway, under Partners Care Advice (PCOI), along with patient handouts about many other health and wellness topics.

What is the Care Alliance PFAC?
Patient and Family Advisory Councils (PFACs), like the Care Alliance (CA), are made up of volunteers who have a variety of experiences with Mass General. At the APF, CA members include patients who are employees and family members of employees. We participate in monthly meetings and help shape APF programs, services, and even new facilities.

Your Care Alliance members
Nancy Davis, Ann Erwin, Bob Evans, Jarrett Maggio, Paul O’Leary, Julie Martin

Contact Us
Please share your experiences or concerns with us, as well as ideas for articles in THE LINK, at apfcarealliance@partners.org.