

Health and Wellness

News You Can Use

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Take care of your back and neck — your body will thank you

Have you experienced back or neck pain? If you have, you are in the majority. Back and/or neck pain are among the most common reasons people go to the doctor or miss work. More than 80% of Americans will experience an episode of low back pain at some time in their lives, according to the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research. Back pain will often come on suddenly, and acute back pain typically lasts less than six weeks. If the pain lasts more than three months, it is considered chronic. Chronic back pain is less common than experiencing an acute episode.

After lower back pain and headaches, neck pain is the third most common type of pain experienced by adult Americans, according to a survey by the National Institute of Health. It has been well documented in various scientific studies that poor posture, repetitive tasks such as typing and prolonged sitting, can lead to complaints of increased neck pain.

Factors that increase your risk

The spine is a common cause of neck and back pain. The primary job of the spine is to support our body's weight and any extra load we may carry, allow for movement and flexibility, support balance and stability and protect the spinal cord from injury. The following factors will increase your risk:

- **Age:** Anyone can develop back pain or neck pain, even children and teens, but back and neck pain is more



common as you get older, often starting in your 30s or 40s.

- **Smoking:** Smoking can keep your body from delivering enough nutrients to the disks in your back and can decrease the ability of the spine to heal itself.
- **Lack of movement:** Muscles lose their strength when not used. Weak, unused muscles in your back might lead to back pain.
- **Excess weight:** Carrying too much weight puts extra stress on your back.
- **Improper lifting:** Heavy lifting or sudden awkward movement can strain

your muscles or ligaments in your back.

- **Poor posture:** Poor posture for a few hours may not cause any problems, but over time it can cause slight changes in your spine, creating problems with your muscles, discs and joints.
- **Stress:** Tense back or neck muscles can cause back or neck pain. Pain increases the tension of the muscles.

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What can you do to treat back and neck pain?

Prevention is the best remedy. Try these tips to keep your back healthy and strong:

Quit smoking

Smokers can receive free resources and assistance to help them quit by calling 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669) or by visiting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention online (cdc.gov). A great resource is the CDC's "Tips From Former Smokers." Your healthcare providers are also a good source for help and support.

Keep moving

Low-impact aerobic activity three to five times a week is recommended, but use caution and don't increase the intensity until you are ready. Examples include walking or swimming. Aerobic exercise will help prevent and lessen back pain by increasing the blood flow and nutrients to the back while decreasing stiffness in the back and joints.

Core-strengthening exercises are another great way to improve your back and abdominal muscles to provide more support for your spine and reduce pain. Consult your physician before starting a robust exercise program.

Maintain a healthy weight

Whether you want to gain, lose or maintain your weight, you must eat wisely to see lasting results. To successfully manage your weight,



develop a plan that includes healthy eating, regular physical activity and strategies to maintain your lifestyle changes. A successful regimen is one that is followed throughout life, not just for a few weeks.

Avoid heavy lifting

Ask for help. If it's necessary to lift something heavy, let your legs do the work. Bend only at your knees, keep your back straight, do not twist your body and hold the object close to your body.

Maintain a good posture

Stand tall. Make sure your shoulders are in a straight line over your hips. If you need to stand for long periods of time, put one foot on a footrest and alternate to take the load off your lower back. Change positions often.

Also sit tall. Choose a seat with good lower back support and armrests, and keep your knees slightly lower than hips. Get up and move around at least every 30 minutes and stretch your neck and shoulders.

Sleep in a good position

Your head and neck should be aligned with your body. Use a small pillow under your neck for additional support.

These tips can help prevent most neck and back pain episodes. If prevention fails, these same tips (in moderation) often will heal you within a few weeks. Our body is very resilient. It can adapt and heal itself. Surgery is rarely needed to treat back pain.

Recipe

Green eggs and ham on the go

Ingredients

- 32 oz liquid egg whites
- 1 medium avocado (mashed with a fork)
- 1 tsp pepper
- 4 oz lower-sodium, low-fat ham, diced into small cubes



Directions

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Place six 8-ounce disposable aluminum baking cups on a baking sheet.
2. In a medium bowl, briskly whisk together the egg whites, avocado and pepper until very well combined and "creamy" in texture.
3. Put half the ham in the baking cups. Pour in the egg white mixture. Top each cup with the remaining ham.
4. Bake for 20 - 25 minutes or until the tops are lightly browned and the eggs are set. Remove the baking sheet from the oven. Let stand to cool.

Source: American Heart Association