Live better with less back pain. Starting today.

Here are six easy things you can do to prevent a back injury from stopping you in your tracks.

1. **Exercise regularly**. Frequent exercise not only increases balance and strength, it also helps keep your back muscles strong. Before you start an exercise program, you should first discuss it with your doctor. Try the following:
   - Flexion exercises. These involve exercises in which you bend forward and strengthen your abdominal muscles. If you have a herniated disc, be sure to check with your doctor first.
   - Extension exercises. These exercises open up the spinal canal in places and develop muscles that support the back.
   - Stretching exercises. The goal of these types of exercises is to stretch and improve the extension of your back muscles and tissues.
   - Aerobic exercise. Fast-walking, jogging and swimming are all good examples of low-impact, aerobic activities, which get your heart pumping faster and keep your heart rate elevated while you're exercising. Try getting the recommended 30 minutes, at least three times a week.

   Be sure to warm up and cool down to help your muscles transition from cold to warm, and help prevent injury.
2. **Eat a healthy diet.** Yes, what you eat can affect the health of your spine. So, fill your plate with plenty of veggies, fruits, whole grains and lean proteins. It's especially important to ensure you get enough calcium and Vitamin D.
   - Calcium is found in dairy products; green, leafy vegetables; and fortified products, like orange juice.
   - Vitamin D is made in your skin through the absorption of sunlight. Try to get ten to fifteen minutes of sunlight at least twice a week. You can also get this important nutrient from foods like salmon, eggs, milk and fortified cereals.
3. **Maintain or lose weight.** Doing so can reduce the strain on your lower back, especially if you tend to gain weight around your midsection.

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4. **Practice good posture when seated, standing and sleeping**

- Keep a straight line all the way down from your ear to shoulder to hip to knee to ankle when standing
- Wear flat shoes and/or alternate putting one foot up on a "step" to help take the pressure off the spine when standing for long periods of time
- If you're a side sleeper, place a pillow between your knees
- If you sleep on your back, place a pillow under your knees
- If you're a stomach sleeper, place a pillow under your stomach

5. **Avoid heavy lifting or learn good form to protect your back**

- Get as close as possible to the item you'll be lifting
- Lift with your knees and legs, not your back
- Keep the item as close to your body as you can when standing up
- Pivot with your shoulders, hips and feet in the direction you need to place the item – do not twist the spine while holding a heavy load
- If you can't pick up the object, consider having someone help you lift it. Also, consider pushing the object – this is typically easier on your back than pulling a heavy load

6. **Release stress.** Get some exercise, socialize, go to a movie or try meditating to help you relieve tension and shrug off the stresses of every day.

For more information on ways to get and stay healthy, visit **myCigna.com**

Sources: niams.nih.gov/Health_Info/Back_Pain/default.asp#10

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