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# Top 10 Tips for Managing Your Back Pain

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## Contents

Introduction.....	3
Tip #1: Get a Correct Diagnosis.....	4
Tip #2: Remove the Cause of Your Back Pain.....	8
Tip #3: Understand the Symptoms of your Back Pain.....	11
Tip #4: Get Appropriate Treatment.....	15
Tip #5: Work on a Correct Posture.....	17
Tip #6: Invest in a Good Mattress.....	19
Tip #7: Buy Good footwear.....	21
Tip #8: Strengthen Your Back.....	24
Tip #9: Do Back Stretching Exercises.....	26
Tip #10: Always use a Correct lifting Technique.....	31
Conclusion.....	35

## Introduction.

Welcome to my Top 10 Tips for Managing Your Back Pain – both to reduce it, and eventually eliminate it. In this ebook, we will cover the 10 most useful steps a person can take to managing (and preventing) back pain. They are:

- Tip #1: Get a Correct Diagnosis.
- Tip #2: Remove the Cause of Your Back Pain.
- Tip #3: Understand the Symptoms of your Back Pain.
- Tip #4: Get Appropriate Treatment.
- Tip #5: Work on a Correct Posture.
- Tip #6: Invest in a Good Mattress.
- Tip #7: Buy Good footwear.
- Tip #8: Strengthen Your Back.
- Tip #9: Do Back Stretching Exercises
- Tip #10: Always use a Correct lifting Technique.

And between them, they cover the majority of advice I give to my patients at my own Physiotherapy clinic.

You can find lots of more useful information on my website: [www.managebackpain.com](http://www.managebackpain.com). But, always remember that nothing beats an in-person assessment from your Doctor or healthcare professional - the information contained in this ebook does not replace specific medical advice. It should only be used to complement advice from your doctor or other medical professional.

I hope you find these Top 10 tips practical and useful.

*Sally Ann Quirke,*  
*Chartered Physiotherapist.*

## Tip #1: Get a Correct Diagnosis.

The correct diagnosis of your back pain causes will result in the correct choice of treatment - and often help you to avoid more extreme measures such as spinal surgery. Also, correctly identifying back pain causes is vital to the long term resolution of the problem, and your doctor or Physiotherapist to help you figure out all of your symptoms and their underlying causes.

This correct diagnosis will result in the proper choice of back pain treatment - and often help you to avoid more extreme measures such as back surgery. In my experience, I typically come across 5 different causes of back pain - and now we will examine each one carefully to better understand the effect of each cause on your symptoms. As a result, this will determine the correct course of back pain treatment.

**The 5 types of back pain causes are:** Poor posture; an Injury or accident; Stress (I'm coming across this one more and more); Ageing; and underlying Medical condition.

It is important to remember that pain is the body's way of telling you that something is wrong. You may not remember injuring your back, but your back ALWAYS remembers being injured. More often than not, the underlying problem has been present for some time before any pain evolves, or the problem is aggravated by a stressful movement or situation resulting in pain. I like to explain this phenomenon to my clients using the analogy of a pair of tight jeans.

These jeans may have been tight from the day you buy them, or at least for some time, but one day a hole appears in a seam somewhere. The tightness has been there all along but the puncture, or pain, only evolves after some time wearing the jeans. The body commonly has tightness LONG before the pain (tear) arises.

As I stated at the beginning, in my experience there are five primary causes of mechanical back pain:

- Poor posture
- Injuries and accidents
- Stress
- Ageing.
- Medical conditions

Lets examine how each of these five factors causes back pain:

### **Posture:**

Each part of your body was designed to be in a specific position. However, even if we start off with perfect posture, modern day living and the requirements of our work environments often work against us and bring about a poor posture. Over time this poor posture weakens the mechanical set up of the body which, when put under stress, may breakdown and the result will be pain. The problems I see most are a result of poor sitting posture, standing posture and working postures (especially what I call computer posture). However, a small adjustment in your posture often eliminates associated back and neck pain. It is ALWAYS important to learn and maintain a good posture.

### **Injuries and accidents:**

Overuse of muscles and joints in an inefficient movement pattern can cause back and neck pain. This is due to excess strain being placed on one muscle group due to an imbalance in the performance between muscle groups. This eventually leads to muscle and joint damage. I often see this brought about by poor lifting technique in the workplace, or simply through poor sitting posture while working at a computer. When it comes to accidents - the cause is pretty evident - everything from sports-related injuries to fractures caused by falls and car/bike accidents. Whiplash in the neck and upper spine is one area that can cause quite a lot of pain further down the line if not treated correctly from the outset.

### **Stress:**

Just as your personality responds to stress in many ways so does your body. The initial reaction of your body to stress is to tighten. When the muscles of your body tighten this has a knock on tightening effect on the nerves, ligaments and the joint to which those muscles attach. This can cause pain and pressure on the organs that the tight muscle surrounds which often results in poor function of the organ. If this continues for any length of time then your bodily health can be compromised in many ways. Despite what we may think, muscles don't forget or let go of stress easily and I often find that a client's injury I am dealing with is the result of very old stress.

### **Aging:**

The single most common underlying cause of back and neck pain I see is the wear and tear associated with aging. People are often advised that there is no treatment available to deal with aging-associated pain – however, this is not true. The pain relief that treatment can bring often leaves patients astonished and wondering why they have put up with their discomfort for so long!

It is certainly true that ligaments get thicker and joints and discs "dry out" with age and this process can result in the nerves and muscles around the spine being affected. This may result in pain, numbness, pins and needles and weakness. The most common age related conditions I treat are trapped nerves or degenerative disc diseases and spinal stenosis. A trapped nerve can result in pain far away from the spine, often down the hip and legs - commonly referred to as sciatica. This very painful condition responds excellently to appropriate treatment.

### **Medical conditions:**

On a daily basis I treat rheumatoid arthritis and Osteo-arthritis, Spondylolisthesis, Scoliosis, and osteoporosis. These physiological conditions can be helped and managed well with physiotherapy treatment.

These represent the majority of back pain causes that I see in my clinic on a daily basis.

Note: The information contained in this ebook does not replace specific medical advice. It should only be used to complement advice from your doctor or other medical professional.

## **Tip #2: Remove the Cause of Your Back Pain.**

Looking for Lower Back Pain relief or a remedy? There is no "one size fits all" remedy - every situation is different - but read on and I think you will be rewarded with a deeper insight into just what is causing your lower back pain - and the best remedial approach.

It is, of course, hard to ignore the symptoms of lower back pain - sometimes they even prevent us from sleeping. So, what is the best lower back pain remedy? The causes of low back pain can be many - everything from poor habitual sitting posture, poor lifting technique for heavy loads, road traffic accidents, pregnancy and arthritis - these are just a few.

Treating lower back pain is quite straightforward in theory: it requires elimination of the cause, followed by strengthening exercises that reduce the risk of re-occurrence. However, in practice, each case has to be examined on an individual basis - correct initial diagnosis is key.

But before we go on - let me remind you that you are not alone: lower back pain will affect up to 80% of us at some stage in our lives. It is 80% of my daily work in my own physiotherapy practice.

### **Lower Back Pain Symptoms.**

Lower back pain symptoms are many and varied - all need to be examined carefully before deciding on the appropriate treatment for your low back pain. The symptoms range from lower back pain alone - to pain with or without pins and needles and numbness in the legs.

The most common symptoms of low back pain that I see are lower right back pain with pain radiating down the right leg. I also see lower left side back pain and central lower back pain, but less frequently.

However, remember I see up to 20 patients a day in my physiotherapy practice and 80% of my clients have low back pain symptoms!!



Pain in the lower back can arise from many structures in your body - structures such as your discs, nerves, joints, ligaments and muscles - which can become strained, torn or impinged. Let's now look at the typical symptoms in turn:

The symptom of pain in your lower back is due to a dysfunction of one of your discs, joints, ligaments or muscles - which results in an inflammatory response causing pain. Put simply, inflammation causes pain!

The symptom of pins and needles is due to a nerve in your lower back being trapped, impinged or damaged. Where the nerve is trapped will dictate where your pins and needles are.

The symptom of numbness, is also due to a nerve being trapped, impinged or diseased in some way.

Movement (standing up, sitting down, walking, reaching etc.) is the most common aggravating factor of mechanical lower back pain symptoms.

If you experience lower back pain at night - and it is not eased by positioning your body in a certain way then you should seek immediate medical attention to eliminate any sinister cause of your lower back pain symptoms.

Here are two general rules of thumb with regard to lower back pain symptoms. If it occurs for a known reason and disappears within 72 hours don't worry too much. If it persists longer than 72 hours and occurs for no apparent reason, or rates higher than 4/10 on a pain scale, then seek medical advice, preferably from a Physiotherapist/Physical Therapist who specialises in lower back pain.

Now, let's have a closer look at some different aspects of Lower Back Pain - treatments and remedies:

## **Lower Back Pain Causes and Treatment.**

Lower back pain is caused mainly by poor posture, poor lifting techniques, road traffic accidents, pregnancy and arthritis. Lower Back Pain treatment should be approached as follows: eliminate the cause and then repair the damaged structure. Here we have a look at some of the more common causes of lower back pain (road traffic accident, poor lifting technique, poor posture) - and then an approach to repair the damaged structures through mobilisation, stretching and posture correction.

## **Low Back Pain Exercises.**

Lower back pain exercises need to be specific to your condition - otherwise injury may result - and are a necessity for the long term resolution of your symptoms.

## **Tip #3: Understand the Symptoms of your Back Pain.**

In a nutshell, your Back Pain Symptoms will depend on both the condition and the structure that is causing the pain. Before deciding on an appropriate treatment for back pain, it is essential to diagnose carefully.

Let's get a few principles sorted out first. Back pain can be either sudden or gradual in onset. Acute back pain can be defined as lasting less than five days while chronic back pain is defined as lasting more than 3 months. Once you achieve an early back pain diagnosis, the time before acute pain becomes chronic pain is the best time to get mechanical help (e.g. from your local Physiotherapist).

Back pain can be felt centrally in the back, on one side only or can radiate down the leg with or without back symptoms.

When I work with individuals in my clinic, I generally look for one of 3 types of Back Pain:

### **Muscle and ligament pain.**

This is an easy one to notice - injured muscles and ligaments in your back symptomatically SCREAM at you if you stretch or bend your back. Generally the symptoms are only in the area where the soft tissues have been strained. You will usually feel the event happening in a sudden onset. I see this type of back pain symptom a lot in sportspeople and gardeners!

### **Disc pain.**

This is one I see a lot. Symptoms vary from severe lower back pain by itself, to no back pain at all - but with pain and/or tingling in the hip, thigh and lower outside leg. Pins and needles and/or numbness may be present. These symptoms in the leg(s) are known as sciatica.

In more severe cases the foot will feel weak and you may feel a dragging sensation in your ankle when you walk. Passing urine and/or stools may be urgently felt or uncontrolled - a situation which usually requires immediate medical attention.

### **Medical conditions.**

The most common conditions I see are spinal stenosis where the spinal canal is narrowed and nerves are trapped sending pain down one or both legs. In this case, lower back and/or leg pain is aggravated by walking and eased by bending forwards.

Other medical conditions that I come across frequently include:

### **Fibromyalgia.**

This is a commonly labelled condition where we suffer from multiple pains in our back, neck and shoulders. It can be difficult to diagnose. Mechanically it involves multiple tender points in the muscles of the back and neck and results in general fatigue.

It is largely treated by drugs but I have come across numerous people who have benefited greatly with advice and treatments from their Chartered Physiotherapist. Some are now pain free.

### **Arthritis.**

Rheumatoid arthritis is an inflammatory condition which often affects the back. Although medical intervention is very important, physiotherapy procedures can significantly help and ease the symptoms.

### **Degenerated discs**

As with your car your body parts degenerate with age and use. However, on a daily basis I see people who have lived with moderate to severe back pain associated with this condition for a

long time, and after just one treatment with some simple advice their symptoms are greatly diminished. Wear and tear does not mean you must live with it!

### **Scoliosis**

This is a twist or deviation in the spine, which can be present from birth or can develop due to poor posture or when the body adopts a coping mechanism to avoid pain. Responses to scoliosis treatments are usually very positive. In my own practice, treatment involves releasing the tensions on the tight side of the curve and showing you specific exercises to strengthen the other side. Simple but true!

### **Kyphosis**

This is a birth posture anomaly that can frequently result from a repetitive postural position. I see it mainly in office workers. Posture correction through Pilates usually provides quick relief and often correction. The earlier the detection the better.

### **Sacro-iliac joint strain**

Commonly seen in women. Can result from poor postural habits or pre, mid or post-pregnancy. It also has a large hormonal influence and therefore can cause lower back pain around the time of ovulation and period. Laxity of ligaments seen in pregnancy can also cause mild to severe lower back pain in this area. Stability of the pelvis through positioning, exercise and a lumbar support belt can provide immediate relief from same.

### **Pubic-symphysis strain**

Also commonly seen in pregnancy due to the laxity of ligaments caused hormonally. It can be relieved quickly with positioning, through mobilisation and support taping.

These are just some of the back pain symptoms I treat on a daily basis in my own clinic. I hope I have helped you to diagnose the type of back pain you may have. If you still feel unsure - please go to your local Doctor or Chartered physiotherapist for help. Remember - you and your doctor/physio need to get to know, and understand, your condition. This will ensure that any back pain treatment will be effective over the long-term.

## Tip #4: Get Appropriate Treatment.

A wide spectrum of back pain treatment is available - and different treatments are appropriate depending on the cause of your back pain and how long it has been present.

When the appropriate treatment is used, most people report that their back pain improves - and often disappears within a few weeks. While many instances of backpain require early intervention by a doctor or other healthcare specialist, I have found that you can assist the speedy resolution of your back pain by using some basic home-care techniques as outlined below.

From the beginning - if you have recent (often referred to as acute) back pain – stay active, and avoid stationary positions. For this type of back pain it is important to remember that staying active is more effective than bed rest. Although your pain may make bed rest attractive at the time, evidence shows that it can lead to future problems such as joint stiffness and muscle pain.

Take a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication such as Neurofen (or generic Ibuprofen), which is available over the counter at your local pharmacy/drugstore. Always seek and follow your pharmacist's advice on the most appropriate use of this medication.

Understand your condition from the outset. People who understand their back pain symptoms respond to treatment and future prevention better. The information on this website can help you with this. However, if you are unsure and have questions about the cause of your back pain or how to manage it, be sure to ask your physiotherapist or orthopaedic general practitioner.

If, despite understanding your back pain and complying with the advice above, your pain has lasted more than two months - I suggest that you would benefit from intensive hands-on treatment.

Physiotherapists who combine stability back strengthening exercises, such as Pilates, with gentle mobilisation, corrective techniques and education, will help improve your function and relieve your back pain. This is the approach that I take with my clients.

Regardless of the severity of your back pain, back surgery is rarely needed. Even a herniated disc or nerve damage is likely to improve with appropriate mobilisation and exercise therapy.

My heartfelt advice is that you exhaust all options before you choose surgical intervention.

The successful resolution of back pain involves immediate treatment as described above, but also an understanding of the cause of your pain. This is of great importance in reducing the likelihood of the pain returning. To avoid further episodes keep your back and stomach muscles strong using Pilates exercises. Apply the posture correction techniques you have learnt and avoid physically and emotionally stressful situations which you know will aggravate your pain.

### **Choosing a Back Pain Specialist.**

There are a number of therapies and specialists (both formal medicine and complementary) that claim to help you with your back pain management. Have a look here for a run down on these specialists.



## Tip #5: Work on a Correct Posture.

Posture correction is essential for the long term resolution of your back pain. In all my years of experience of treating back and neck pain - I have found that if you do not first correct a clients posture, they will not have a full recovery from their back and neck pain.

Once I have eased my client of their pain, posture correction is the very next thing that we tackle together. Put simply, long-term resolution of back and neck pain relies on this correction.

Postural correction is both positional (obtaining the correct positions for YOUR particular body parts!) and strength-related (strengthening particular muscles to hold your positional posture).

Let's run through positional posture correction and strength-related postural work in turn:

### Positional posture correction:

Is where your physiotherapist shows you the correct positions for individual body parts as well as when they work in unison.

It is essential for you to take this information on board - ask questions if you do not understand - and apply it from the outset. With initial practice, this learned awareness becomes more familiar and easier to hold, at which stage you should progress to strength-related posture exercises.

### Strength-related posture:

Relies on your understanding of positional posture, and your ability to arrange your body parts into their correct positions (this will take initial concentration and effort and practice).

Strength-related postural work involves a series of exercises devised to strengthen the muscles involved in holding your body parts in their correct position. The goal is that once these muscles are strong enough, they will automatically hold you in a good posture, and the intense effort and concentration required at the outset will be reduced greatly.

A good chartered physiotherapist would be my person of choice to carry out posture analysis, and then devise and teach you a programme that will work for you - and then encourage you to see it through. However, being a Pilates instructor as well as a physio myself, I also believe that a good Pilates instructor will help you on your way (ideally a physical therapist who is also a pilates instructor is a REAL find!) If you run into any difficulty they will hopefully communicate with your physiotherapist as required.

So, Pilates is my programme of choice that I use for strength-related postural work. It is both safe and effective (see here for more about the difference between Yoga and Pilates). Having said that, people often ask me if going to the gym is any good for posture correction? The answer is probably no - as without the knowledge of what you are trying to correct - you may just strengthen old patterns of posture. And these are often the underlying cause of your pain.

## Tip #6: Invest in a Good Mattress.

I often give my new clients a single page mattress buying guide when they look for advice in buying a new mattress - but want to ensure that their investment alleviates back discomfort and pain.

Before we proceed with our mattress buying guide, please remember that you spend almost one third of your life in bed - sleeping! Selecting the correct mattress for your back is crucial for your health. Your body needs to be able to relax in a good posture so that it can recover from its days work and respond well to the demands of the following day. If your body does not rest easy over time it will fatigue and become "dis-eased" in some way.

The result of poor sleep in my physiotherapy world is back and neck pain!

Also, please remember that there are many environmental reasons for choosing a correct mattress. Many mattresses contain many chemicals which we are absorbing and breathing into our bodies night after night - especially in the form of fire retardant. Where possible buy an organic mattress made from natural fibres- more so if your general health is a particular concern. These are typically not treated with chemical flame retardants and are made from organic cotton, wool and coir(coconut fibre). This is worthwhile bearing in mind if you are considering a mattress, or pillow, made from a memory foam such as polyurethane.

Choosing a mattress to prevent and treat back pain is a well discussed topic in the physiotherapy and health world. However, remember that choosing a mattress is both a subjective and objective procedure.

Subjectively - you must feel comfortable lying on your mattress and inhaling its smell.

Objectively - I advise people on the type of mattress I think may help in the treatment, prevention and ultimate resolution of their back pain and stiffness.

If you have a stiff lower back - and have a deep curve at the base of your spine that does not flatten to the ground naturally when you lie down,(known as an increased lumbar lordosis) - then I usually advise a mattress that is supportive but not too hard. In my experience if you have an increased lumbar lordosis and sleep on a hard mattress your spine remains arched in your sleep while you are lying on your back. Most of my clients with this back posture report waking up with increased back pain in the morning if they have been sleeping on their backs. They tend to sleep on their sides to resolve this problem. However, if their mattress is a little softer sleeping on their backs is not a problem.

On the other hand if you have a flexed lower back (known as a flat back) and you tend to slouch when you sit, your back will benefit more from a firmer style mattress. If your flexed lower back is not supported enough it may get worse. This is as a result of a softer bed encouraging and supporting your flexed posture, often pushing it into further flexion while you sleep.

Ultimately, understanding your posture type will help you choose the best mattress for your back pain. Ask your physiotherapist/Physical Therapist to help you on this one! Nearly every day I hear of someone who has spent a lot of money on a mattress that has not helped their back pain. Do your research first!

The cost of your mattress is not always indicative of its quality and effectiveness in the treatment of back pain. Sometimes a cheap mattress can tick all the boxes that your back requires. However, in my experience with mattress-buying - you often have to pay more to get a mattress that has fewer chemicals in its makeup, which I firmly believe is very important with respect to your general health.

So, that's the basic mattress buying guide - do your research - both on the types and features of mattresses available and on your lying posture type before you open your wallet!

## Tip #7: Buy Good footwear.

When it comes to back pain relief products, your shoes and footwear can have a surprising effect on your back pain - and back pain relief!

From the age of 21 I started developing bunions on both feet. Bunions are bony lumps off the side of your big toe! They are actually the top of a bone in your big toe that subluxes medially, causing this lump of bone to appear! Bunions can be hereditary but more often they are due to poor foot biomechanics. Following on - poor foot biomechanics can be hereditary or else they can result from injury or trauma to your legs or feet. They are silent but deadly! What I mean by that is that they do not appear overnight. They gradually appear over years, and one day you will see them and the next day they will hurt!

Thankfully, early detection and intervention has resolved the pain and deterioration of my bunions. I wear orthotics, and by understanding footwear I have a wardrobe of shoes that are comfortable and good for my feet and back. I truly believe footwear is fundamental for back pain management.

Recently, I advised a client to wear a higher heel and within one week her back pain had reduced considerably. However footwear is only a part of my overall lower back pain treatment protocol. Good footwear is fundamental in the treatment of biomechanical injuries.

Most of you will be familiar with fallen arches, otherwise known as flat feet. Often people go to their pharmacy or shoe shop and buy "arch supports", or shoes with inbuilt arch supports. These can often be doing more harm than good. The reason for this is that the cause of your fallen arch must be identified. If it is due to poor alignment of your hip or knee, then these areas must be treated and then appropriate footwear advised.

If you wear supports or shoes for fallen arches and the problem is in your hip you may over time end up with a very sore hip or knee! However, it is a tricky one as when you wear this footwear

initially you may feel better. This is due to the shoe or support shifting the weight off the sore part of your foot. However, over time the truth will reveal itself and further breakdown of your body may occur. Seek a chartered physiotherapist's opinion, who has studied foot biomechanics in detail before you embark on the wardrobe of unworn shoes!! Trust me I have been there!

### **So, what are the best shoes for back pain relief?**

Unfortunately, there is no simple answer. Each person will require a different piece of advice regarding their shoes. This is dependent on their posture, foot type, weight and the cause of your injury if pain is present. If you notice you are wearing your shoes to one side do not continue to attend a cobbler to fix them, seek medical help before the pain and breakdown of tissue occurs. Early intervention and prevention is the only way!

So, back to shoes! An everyday shoe should be deep in the heel cup. It should have an inbuilt shock absorbing insole that travels as far as the top of the inside of the shoe. It should be leather. It should be wide enough at the front to allow for the width of your toes without being too wide! Never buy a shoe one size bigger than your foot to accommodate the width of your foot! This always leads to trouble! High heels are ok for some and deadly for others. This depends on your back posture. If you have a lordotic lower spine, heels may just drive your back pain crazy! Listen to your body and if you feel aches after wearing heels keep them for very special occasions.

If you have flat arches, bunions, thickened skin under your foot, or pain you may require an orthotic. This is a specific insole designed for your foot. A physiotherapist will mould your foot and assess your body. From this template a perfect position for your foot will be found and you will be very happy indeed.

Recently, I have taken on a range of footwear called Aetrex that has an inbuilt orthotic system. The shoes and runners are designed so that I can remove the existing insole of the shoe and insert a readymade insole into the shoe depending on the foot in question.

So far, the results are great and much cheaper than other methods. However, exercises are also an important part of using orthotics. Please ask the professional!

## Tip #8: Strengthen Your Back.

Back strengthening exercises are an absolute necessity for the long term management (and avoidance) of back pain.

Back pain exercises can reduce your pain both in the short term and more permanently in the long term. However, success lies in:

- Correct choice of strengthening exercises for your individual back condition.
- Having them taught correctly to you.
- And then performed correctly by you!

Too often I see clients who have been doing home back exercises incorrectly. This, over time can lead to a worsening of your back pain and can be the underlying cause in the development of new back pain symptoms. Always seek an expert's advice prior to doing back strengthening exercises regularly.

The type of back strengthening exercise that I would give you in my own clinic would depend on your postural type and the symptoms that you have, or have experienced in the past with your back.

If you have a "sway back posture" the exercises that I would give you would be very different to the ones I use for a "lordotic back posture".

If your back pain was as a result of poor postural habits, then I would use posture exercises to strengthen your posture. However, if you have a specific weakness at one disc or joint level in your back, I would teach you specific exercises and ways of strengthening that part of your spine anatomy.

If you have a back flexibility problem, I would mobilise and loosen your back before I teach you strengthening exercises. I consider this to be very important, as if you strengthen around a poor



alignment you may create further problems. Imagine a stack of bricks piled one on top of the other. If one of those bricks is out of alignment and you put cement around it to strengthen it, the end result would not be too good!!! Similarly if you strengthen your spine while it is out of alignment the effect would not be too great either!!

Ultimately, back strengthening exercises are down to timing and specifics. If you use the correct strengthening exercise for your back at the right time the result will amaze you!

## Tip #9: Do Back Stretching Exercises

Back stretches are a critical part of managing - and preventing - your back pain.

Similar to your back strengthening exercises, stretching exercises need to be specific to each person's back problem. Back stretching exercises, when performed incorrectly or inappropriately, can result in further damage and pain to your back as well as neck pain.

Stretching your back correctly gives us a wonderful feeling!! One of the nicest feelings that patients report to me, is when they learn the correct stretch for their tightness and pain.

One of my clients said "Sally-Ann, this stretch is simply delicious!"

Many people ask me what are the benefits of back stretches?

The answer my friends is this! Stretching:

- Reduces muscle tightness.
- Increases range of movement in joints.
- Improves blood circulation locally.
- Improves energy levels.
- Improves posture and movement patterns.

As we get older our muscles naturally get tighter and our joints often stiffen. As a result of this our movement patterns are altered and excess stress can be placed on joints and muscles often causing pain.

Often I hear from older people who struggle with drying their toes in the morning after a shower! All this can be helped and often prevented by regular stretching. Stretching as we get older makes life much easier!

For the younger person stretching is a huge factor in the prevention of injury - especially in sport. Each sport relies on different muscles to perform the required movement. As a result

some muscles will get tight. This tightness can be the underlying cause of an injury. Understanding which muscles in your posture and sport will get tight will allow you to stretch them regularly and prevent injury. Ask a chartered Physiotherapist or physical therapist to advise you. Prevention is always better than cure.

Everyone can learn to stretch no matter how old or fit they are. Stretching should be a part of your every day routine regardless if you exercise or not! Depending on your age and lifestyle a stretching program can be anything from one done as you watch television to an intense stretching hour on the floor. An expert will guide you to a program that suits your needs. Stretching does not have to take a lot of time if you know the important stretches for your body type. The benefits are huge!!! Get stretching!!

Stretching is required for regaining flexibility in the muscles, ligaments and joints of your spine. When a muscle gets tight it contracts and becomes shorter. This shortened muscles compresses the structures underneath and over time will result in further “dis-ease.” Tightness in the tissues of your spine can creep up on you. Tightness usually develops gradually over time - it rarely occurs overnight!

The most common causes of tightness in the back that I see are:

### **Soft tissue tears.**

If a torn tissue is not facilitated in its recovery it may heal in a shortened position. The earlier gentle stretches are started on a tear in a tissue the better. It will assist the tissue to heal more efficiently.

However, the grade of early stretches needs to be tailored specifically for each case, so seek professional advice from a chartered physiotherapist. Aggressive stretching at the early stages of healing could result in further damage.

### **Poor posture over time.**

If you adopt a poor standing or sitting posture for long periods of time, then certain muscles in your back and neck will shorten and become less efficient. Left untreated, this tightness may result in other muscles becoming weak as the tightened muscles “take over” as such.

This combination of tight and weak muscles frequently results in breakdown of tissues in your spine, causing eventual pain and disability. It is the most common clinical finding that I see in nearly all of my patients. Early intervention could prevent this from occurring.

### **Protective mechanisms**

If you have a disc prolapse your body will automatically tighten in response to the pain. It is one of the body’s ways of preventing you from doing further harm, resulting from you moving in certain ways.

Although these protective mechanisms can be of great help in the early days of your condition, left untreated for too long they can result in tightness and over activity becoming more permanent. This can lead to postural back pain at a later stage. Early intervention is the key. But get going with those back stretches today - and you will feel better every day!

And now - here's some Back Stretching Exercises to get you going. Obviously the type of back stretches that you should do will depend on the type of back problem that you have. However, the following are four of the most frequently administered stretches for the back that I use on a daily basis in my Physiotherapy Practice.

If you suffer from back pain ask a chartered Physiotherapist or Physical therapist for advice before you do these stretches.

### **Back Extension stretches:**

**Purpose:** This exercise is good for counteracting all the strain on your back from prolonged sitting and bending activities.

**Instructions:**

- Stand tall
- Support your lower back with both your hands and all your fingers.
- Arch your back backwards into the support of your hands.
- Hold for two seconds.
- Repeat 5 times

**Note:** Never move into pain and if it hurts contact a qualified therapist as it may not be suitable for your back.

### **Back rotation stretches.**

**Purpose:** This exercise is good for stretching the muscles and ligaments of your lower sides and back.

**Instructions:**

- Lie on your back with your knees bent, feet on the floor and feet and knees together.
- Let both knees fall to right as far as you can without pain and while keeping your feet on the floor.
- Slowly return your legs to the start position and repeat the exercise to the left.
- Do five to each side slowly

**Note:** Your lower back will most likely come off the floor-this is ok!

### **Hamstring Stretch:**

**Purpose:** This stretch is important as tight hamstrings are a common cause of lower back pain.

#### **Instructions:**

- Lie on your back with your legs straight on the floor.
- Bend your right knee towards your chest
- Straighten your right leg as far as you can towards the ceiling-the aim being to have your hip, knee and ankle in a straight line.

Once you feel the stretch on the back of your leg hold it for 30seconds.

Repeat this stretch on your left leg. Do three on each side.

**Note:** Never perform a hamstring stretch if it brings on back pain. If it does seek professional advice.

### **Lower back flexion stretch:**

**Purpose:** This stretch is good for stretching your lower back and hips.

#### **Instructions:**

- Lie on your back, knees bent up and feet flat on floor.
- Feet and knees together.
- Place each hand behind its corresponding knee.
- Gently pull knees into your chest.
- Hold for 3-5 seconds.
- Repeat five times.

**Note:** If it hurts don't do it without professional guidance.

## **Tip #10: Always use a Correct lifting Technique.**

How is your Lifting Technique and lifting safety? Are you tired of feeling pain in your back after lifting items for any length of time?

One of the most common causes of back pain that I see in my practice is related to poor lifting techniques, habits and injuries.

Commonly my clients say to me "how surprised I am to be in trouble as I was only lifting for a few minutes."

However, my comment is always that: "a lot of back pain injuries associated with lifting are not as a result of one lift alone, but a series of poor lifting habits over months, and sometimes years, that result in eventual breakdown of tissue. Finally resulting in pain".

Often, the first time you feel back pain associated with lifting, it will ease after 24 hours. However, the duration and intensity of your lifting-related back pain commonly increases with each episode.

The longer you ignore it, and subsequently ignore the correction of your lifting technique, the worse your back pain will become. This pattern makes resolution more difficult. So seek early intervention and advice please.

The two most common reasons for back pain associated with lifting are:

- Poor lifting techniques
- Repetitive lifting with a poor technique

This means that your back pain associated with lifting is either as a result of poor technique and/or overuse, both equally stressful on your back.

Often, a small change in your lifting technique - or doing a few exercises pre and post lifting - can eliminate your back pain. Frequently, my clients say to me "if I had known it would be so easy to resolve I would have come to you much sooner". My answer is that it is never too late to read on and get going!!

Back Pain Symptoms with poor lifting technique.

There are many back pain symptoms associated with lifting, but the most common ones I see are:

### **Lower back pain.**

Pain and difficulty straightening the back into an upright position from a bent over position.

Pain and difficulty standing up after sitting down for any length of time.

The cause of these symptoms is due to the muscular nature of the injury. Most lifting injuries are a result of a strain, or tiredness, placed on the lower back muscles in a bent forward position. In this position - where the knees are straight - excess stretch is placed on the soft tissues of your lower back. They then either tear or become inflamed due to fatigue and overuse.

If you move into the opposite position - in this situation straightening up - back pain results. This pain results as the muscles required to straighten you up are the very ones you have overstretched. To straighten up they need to contract which is difficult for them in their current condition! Try stretching your little finger backwards and holding it on stretch for ten minutes, and then attempt to bend it - it too will be painful!

Other symptoms of back pain associated with lifting are:

- Lower right back pain and lower left side back pain.
- Middle back pain
- Pain along the back of your thighs
- Buttock pain



These symptoms are generally a result of lifting injuries where you twist as well as bend your back - for example, lifting a suitcase from a baggage carousel to an airport trolley. Twisting-related back pain injuries tend to be more severe and one sided. They too are very common lifting injuries I see in my clinic.

If your symptoms from your lifting-related back pain do not ease within 24 hours, or if they re-occur more than once, please seek help on improving and understanding your lifting technique.

### **Treatment of lifting-related back pain.**

"How do I treat my back after injuring it while lifting?"

The treatment you require will depend on the type of injury you have sustained. Lifting-related injuries to the back can affect the joints, discs, muscles, ligaments and nerves. What you have injured will dictate and influence your back pain treatment.

An injured joint will be treated very differently to an injured ligament, so the diagnosis is again very important. A thorough history of how you injured your back while lifting, and a detailed explanation of the exact position and weight you were lifting will be of great help in the effectiveness of your treatment - and ultimately in the duration it will take to resolve things fully.

An effective treatment will:

- Identify the cause of the lifting-related back pain.
- Identify the structure in your back that is injured
- Correction of any alignment problems in your back
- Identify the fault in your lifting technique
- Educate you on how to lift correctly
- Strengthen the muscle in your core associated with lifting

By addressing these factors the chances of re-occurrence are lessened greatly. However, the pain is often gone before the core strength has improved and patients frequently forget to continue their exercises for long enough to ensure that this aspect of rehabilitation is effective.

Follow your rehabilitation through fully to reduce the risks of further episodes of lifting-related back pain! Remember, prevention is better than cure!

Remember when lifting have your feet shoulder distance apart, bend your knees and keep your back as straight as possible. Move your feet rather than twisting your back. Seek help if it is too heavy. As always if in doubt shout!

### **Exercises to strengthen your back for lifting.**

In life we have to be able for what we do. If you are a surgeon you have learned and prepared how to operate on a person before you do so. Similarly, if you are lifting you must prepare yourself for the lift. This involves both knowledge of the lifting technique and the physical strength and awareness to perform lifting safely.

Although I cannot guarantee you that this preparation will fully prevent lifting related back pain – it will definitely reduce the risks.

## Conclusion.

So, they are my Top 10 Tips for Managing Your Back Pain – both to reduce it, and eventually eliminate it.

You can find lots of more useful information on my website: [www.managebackpain.com](http://www.managebackpain.com) and always remember that nothing beats an in-person assessment from your Doctor or healthcare professional - the information contained in this ebook does not replace specific medical advice. It should only be used to complement advice from your doctor or other medical professional.

Good Luck and Good Health!

*Sally Ann Quirke,*  
*Chartered Physiotherapist.*