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Simple changes could make a difference in what ails your back

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You can feel it when you get out of bed in the morning, as you hover over the steering wheel on the commute and even at work, whether you're slouched in an office chair or up and moving around. Back pain is a seemingly inescapable ailment for many Americans -- an ache that just won't go away. Unfortunately, spine degeneration is coupled with age, but while it may be unavoidable, it can also be contained. We've put together a list of things you might be doing to worsen your back pain -- a cease and desist, of sorts.

Carrying too much weight

Obesity is one of the leading causes of back pain, according to Alison Miller, a physical therapist at Texas Heath Care Bone and Joint Clinic in Fort Worth. The stress that extra pounds add to your spine and back muscles speeds up the degenerative process that typically progresses with age, she says. Let freedom from back pain motivate you.

Miller says to focus on building a strong core, from the abdomen and back muscles to those that surround your hips and pelvis. Losing just 10 pounds could help neutralize your back pain and in some cases greatly reduce it.

Slumping

Heed your mother's advice and "Stand up straight!"

Sean Henry, a surgeon at the Texas Back Institute, says poor posture -- generally stemming from long days sitting at a desk -- can certainly worsen your back pain. It's important to keep your neck, shoulders and back in line while you toil away at your day job.

Some tips from Henry and Miller: If you talk on the phone often, use a hands-free set that will prevent angling your neck all day. Adjust the settings on your desk chair so you are comfortable but still sitting upright -- high backed chairs are typically better for posture. Situate your chair in line with your computer, so you're looking at the screen straight on instead of at an angle. Resist the temptation to curl up, and instead sit with your feet flat on the ground, with your knees at a 90-degree angle.

Putting your back into it

Back- and neck-pain diagnoses can typically be traced back to an injury, and those injuries are almost always related to lifting, Henry says.

The No. 1 thing to think about when lifting any object -- heavy or not -- from the ground is keeping your back straight. When your back is straight, the bulk of the job goes to your legs, where your muscles are stronger.

The No. 2 thing to avoid is twisting while you lift, Henry says. Instead, turn your entire body, so there's no strain on your back. Miller advises that you keep whatever you are carrying close to your body, and Henry says to avoid lifting or moving heavy objects without help from a friend.

Stacking pillows

It's always tempting to hoard pillows, but Miller says it's best to sleep with only one. She doesn't recommend specific pillows but says that stacking them too high puts your neck at an angle for an entire night's rest.

While getting your eight hours, try to keep your spine straight and your neck in line -- that's right, that means avoiding the always-comfy sleeping positions on your stomach.

Gardening till it hurts

There's no reason to hide your green thumb, but spending too much time hunched over a garden can wreak havoc on your back.

Miller recommends that gardeners who suffer from day-after back stress should go green in half-hour increments.

"Avoid staying in one position for too long. Take breaks," she said. As well, stay close to the ground, kneeling on pads or sitting on a stool, rather than spending time bent over at the waist, she said.

Toting too much

Oversized purses may be chic, but they can often hold too much. Miller suggests that you shed some weight from your purse, diaper bag, backpack or briefcase -- seriously, do you really need to carry all that stuff? And try to distribute the weight evenly. If you carry a big bag, switch shoulders often.

Driving too much

Summer is the perfect season for road trips, but if you suffer from back pain, plan to stop often. Miller says determined drivers often overdo it, spending too much time cooped up in the car. Plan to stop every two hours, and when you do, get out, stretch and walk around. It may add time to your trip, but it will also take stress off your spine.

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