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Dig in correctly to avoid back pain

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Do you love to garden but wish to avoid the back pain that comes with it? Weeding, raking, mowing, lifting heavy objects and being confined to one position for long periods of time are common causes of back pain. However, the exercise that comes with gardening can be healthy and help build strength and endurance. Dr. Michael Duffy, an independently practicing orthopedic spine surgeon at the Texas Back Institute and on the medical staff at Methodist Mansfield Medical Center, explains how to enjoy gardening while taking care of your back.

"The spine was designed for movement. Bending or kneeling for extended periods of time can stiffen the back muscles and put undue strain on the spine and the structures that support it," Duffy says. "To help avoid back pain, stretch before and after working in the garden and when doing repetitive movements. And every 20 to 30 minutes, get up, move around and stretch. This helps keep the muscles and body balanced and relieves tension and strain."

Movement also stimulates blood flow, reduces strain from prolonged kneeling or sitting and brings oxygen to your back, helping to reduce stiff muscles and curb inflammation. If possible, march in place, do gentle back bends, reach down and touch your toes and bend at your waist from side to side. Go green and lean against a tree to stretch and strengthen your thighs.

Understanding that gardeners often work hunched over, Duffy suggests simple stretches to help alleviate stiffness. Bend your neck forward and back and then side to side, holding each position for 10 seconds. Stand up straight and clasp your hands behind your head. Then place your hands behind your hips and slowly bend backward for 10 seconds, and then lean to one side and then the other.

While working, Duffy encourages gardeners to be aware of their posture. When weeding or planting, try not to bend from the waist. Instead, squat with both knees bent or kneel on a pad.

If you're working close to the ground, use a low-padded kneeling stool with side handles to help you stand up, or sit on a stool rather than spending time bent over at the waist, he says.

When raking or hoeing, keep tools close to your body and keep your back straight to reduce strain. When digging or shoveling, insert the head of the shovel vertically into the ground and step on the blade, bending your knees not your back. Pivot with your lower extremities, not your back, so that your whole body moves rather than twisting your spine.

Be sure to choose gardening tools that are the right size and weight for you. They should be ergonomically designed with padded handles and spring action. A long-handled shovel is easier to use when digging into the soil, and a wheelbarrow can help move heavy objects.

Lifting heavy objects is also a common cause of hyperextension injuries, Duffy says. This can occur when the weight is too heavy for the body's trunk to maintain stability and the lower back has to overextend to compensate.

"When lifting large amounts of soil or other heavy items, rather than bending over, place your feet shoulder-width apart, bend at the knees and lift with your legs to avoid injury to your lower back," Duffy explains.

Duffy encourages people to reduce their risk of developing back pain by strengthening their abdominal muscles, including those that surround your hips and pelvis. In addition to adopting a healthy lifestyle that includes strength training, regular physical activity and good nutrition, losing just 10 pounds can help neutralize your back pain and in some cases greatly reduce it.

Back pain is the most common cause of disability for people younger than 45. At any given time, 25 percent to 60 percent of adults have back pain.

"Current figures show that some 80 percent to 90 percent of all Americans will experience low-back pain in their lifetime, with less than 10 percent of lower back pain lasting more than two weeks. Overall, less than 1 percent will need surgery," Duffy says.

See a doctor if your back pain develops after an injury or infection or if you experience sharp pain, numbness or tingling. If you suffer from pain that radiates down your legs or if the pain is accompanied by incontinence, it's time to see a doctor to figure out why the pain is not getting better.

What would life be like without back or neck pain? Learn how to make it a reality at Back Talk, a free community health event from 10 a.m. to noon Aug. 6 inside Conference Rooms A and B at Methodist Mansfield Medical Center.

You'll learn from physicians about the causes and latest treatments for relieving back and neck pain, restoring mobility and getting back to life. In addition, physical therapists can show you how to align your spine and provide you with exercises to strengthen your core and loosen a stiff neck, back, arm or leg muscles. You will also have an opportunity to talk with doctors, enjoy light refreshments and obtain giveaways. Seating is limited for this free event, so register today at www.MethodistHealthSystem.org/BackTalk or by calling toll-free 877-637-4297.