

# How to look after *your back*

It affects 80 per cent of us but how do you prevent lifelong problems? We asked three leading experts...

## MEET OUR EXPERTS



### **Mushtaque Ishaque**

is a spinal consultant surgeon at BMI The Priory

Hospital in Birmingham. He specialises in spinal conditions related to degenerative disc disease.



### **Tim Hutchful**

is a registered British Chiropractic Association

chiropractor. He's helping to champion the Straighten Up UK campaign, which promotes back care.



### **Simon Webster**

is a lead physio at Nuffield Health,

which has a national network of more than 2,000 physiotherapists.

## Listen to *your body*

'As we get older, it's normal to get a bit more back pain. Learn to read your back to discover the cause,' says Mushtaque. 'The pain isn't just something you've woken up with, it's due to something you did the day before. Whatever the trigger,

modify the activity. Do the task in stages, try new ways of approaching it and avoid being stuck in one position. Remember, when you feel that first twinge, stop what you're doing. That's the twinge that will give you trouble the next day.'

## Be more *proactive*



Keep your  
back in  
shape

'We don't wait till we've got toothache before we brush our teeth,' says Tim. 'Be just as proactive with your back. Get started by following the Straighten Up UK programme developed by the British Chiropractic Association. The exercises stretch the muscles, make you more mobile and only take three minutes a day.' Watch the exercises at [chiropractic-uk.co.uk/straightenup](http://chiropractic-uk.co.uk/straightenup).

### TRY IT NOW...

To help you warm up, do the Twirling Star. Standing tall, spread your arms (at shoulder height) and legs into a star shape. With your belly button drawn in, gently turn your head to look at one hand. Slowly twist your entire spine to watch your hand as it goes behind you. Relaxing in this position, breathe out and in. Perform twice to each side, enjoying the gentle stretch.

## Start sleeping *symmetrically*

Sleep is one of our most prolonged postures and if you sleep on your right side with your left leg over the top of your right leg (or vice versa) it will create a twist in the spine and the muscle in the hip can become long and quite weak,' says Simon. 'Aim to

keep your spine in alignment. If you sleep on your back, put a cushion under your knees. If you suffer with neck or lower back pain, sleep on your side and keep legs together.' To make this easier and more comfortable, place a pillow between your knees.



Keep your spine  
aligned at night



## Move *better*

'It's vital to avoid lifting, bending and twisting in awkward ways,' says Mushtaque. 'Yet many everyday chores, like vacuuming, loading the dishwasher and washing machine, and even washing your hands, make you lean forward in a half-cocked position. You need to avoid this because the leverage point is the middle of your lumbar spine and the muscles above that have to work hard to keep you there. However, a few small changes in how you move will make a significant difference over the weeks and months...'

**DISHWASHER** Put your right hand on the worktop, step forward with your left foot and move your right leg backwards letting it come off the floor slightly as you bend forwards, keeping your back straight and strong.

**VACUUMING** Never do the whole house in one go.

**WASHING** Put your washing basket right under the door to the machine, squat down and keep your body square on. Water adds more weight to your clothes, so never lift the whole basket. Transfer the washing to your ailer or line in stages.

**IN THE CAR** Don't lean between the seats to pick up shopping from the back seat. It means you're not only lifting but also twisting. Open the back door to take it out.

## When to see *your GP*



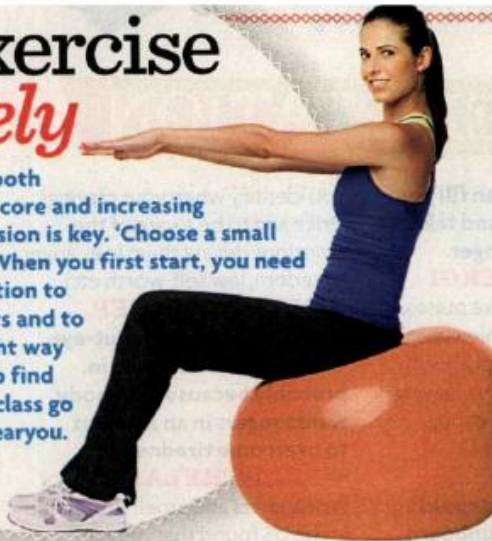
'Back pain should go away within one to three weeks,' according to *Woman's Own's*

Dr Radha Modgil. 'But if it doesn't, go to see your GP. However, if you experience any of these "red flag" symptoms, seek medical help immediately...'

- ◆ Numbness in the legs or groin
- ◆ Fever
- ◆ Unexplained weight loss
- ◆ Bowel or bladder problems
- ◆ Swelling in the back

## Exercise *safely*

Pilates is good for both strengthening your core and increasing flexibility, but precision is key. 'Choose a small class,' says Simon. 'When you first start, you need the teacher's attention to identify your faults and to be shown the right way to do things.' To find your nearest class go to [pilatesnearyou.co.uk](http://pilatesnearyou.co.uk).



## Take *breaks*

'Sitting at a 90-degree angle for hours is virtually the same as standing and bending forwards 90 degrees, and we all know long stretches in that position would be no good for us,' says Tim. 'Muscles and joints are made for movement. If we stop using them, they start to cause problems. Blood flow to them will be reduced and they'll feel stiff. But with regular movement, joints and muscles will ache less.' Simon recommends following the 55/5 rule. 'Split each hour into 55 minutes working and five minutes away from your desk,' he says. 'When it's not possible to get up, do movements at your desk, like stretching your arms and legs, gently turning your head from side to side and, while sitting up straight, look up to the ceiling.'



Words: Natalie Cook. Photos: Camera Press, SuperStock, iStockphoto.com.  
Getty. Always consult your GP before taking any supplements.