

# Get Moving: *Strengthening Your Back Through Exercise*

## The best way to prevent — and often treat — back pain is to get moving.

Starting an exercise routine can seem like a daunting task if you suffer with any type of back pain. But exercises that help strengthen or restore strength to your back should be an integral part of your recovery plan, according to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons.

Exercising your back muscles for 15 minutes a day, two to three times per week can:

- Strengthen back muscles
- Increase flexibility and range of motion
- Reduce pain and tension in the back

Regular exercise can also speed recovery and boost your mood too.

### Mix it up

It's best to combine back-strengthening exercises with aerobic exercises and healthy lifestyle choices. This will also help you to improve your overall health and mental outlook.

Exercises such as walking, swimming or riding a stationary bike can build muscle strength, endurance and flexibility. When done properly, these moves won't jolt or strain the back.

Adding activities like yoga, Pilates and working with a balance ball can help strengthen and stretch your "core" — the pelvis, back and abdominal muscles — that helps stabilize your spine and protect it from injury. This is especially important if you spend a lot of time sitting down.

### REMINDER

As always, talk with your health care team before beginning any exercise routine, especially if your back pain is due to an accident or other trauma. Some exercises can do more harm than good and may unknowingly increase injury or pain.



Exercises that may help reduce or prevent back pain include:

- **Strengthening exercises** that target your "core" — your pelvis, back, stomach, and leg muscles.
- **Stretching exercises** that increase flexibility, range of motion and make you less prone to injury.
- **Aerobic exercise** to get your heart pumping and condition other muscles.

## Examples of back exercises



Fortunately, many back exercises are easy enough to do at home and don't require any special equipment.

If you have back pain, experts recommend starting with some of the following exercises:

### Ankle pumps

- ✓ Lie flat on your back.
- ✓ Move ankles up and down (flex them up and then point).
- ✓ Repeat 10 times.

### Pelvic tilt

- ✓ Start on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor.
- ✓ Your arms can either rest on your hips or you can place them under your head.
- ✓ Tighten your abdominal muscles and push your lower back into the floor — think about flattening your back against the floor and don't raise your low back off the floor.
- ✓ Hold for 5 seconds.
- ✓ Relax.
- ✓ Repeat 10 times.

### Yoga cat pose

- ✓ Use a yoga mat or find a carpet.
- ✓ Get on your hands and knees, placing your hands under your shoulders and knees under your hips.
- ✓ Round your back and let your head drop at the same time.
- ✓ Then slowly let your back and stomach sag toward the floor and lift your head upward.
- ✓ Use steady movements.
- ✓ Hold the position for 5 seconds.
- ✓ Repeat 10 times.

### Knee-to-chest

- ✓ Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor.
- ✓ Using both hands, hold the back of your thigh and pull one knee up and press it to your chest.
- ✓ Hold for up to 30 seconds.
- ✓ Return to the starting position.
- ✓ Repeat 5 times on each side.

## Examples of back exercises

### Yoga child pose

- ✓ Get down on all fours with hands and knees on ground.
- ✓ Bring your rear end back onto your legs and stretch your arms in front of you with your hands on the ground.
- ✓ Hold for up to 30 seconds.
- ✓ Return to the starting position.
- ✓ Repeat 5 times.



### Stand and slowly roll down

- ✓ Stand up against wall with your arms at sides.
- ✓ Lean forward and down.
- ✓ Slowly roll down, one vertebrae at a time, with arms loosely hanging down and head bending over. (Vertebrae are the individual bones that make up the spinal column.)
- ✓ Slowly roll back up one vertebrae at a time.

A big part of these exercises is relaxing — relaxing has to do with getting rid of tension that might be making your back pain worse.

To really relax, you may want to start with diaphragmatic breathing. Lie on your back and inhale through your nose. As you breathe in, you should focus on feeling the air fill your belly, not your chest. Exhale slowly through the mouth.

### Keep in mind

Try to be active every day.

When beginning a back exercise routine:

- Listen to your body and don't push yourself too hard.
- Avoid exercises that involve sudden, jerking movements.
- Remember to breathe deeply as you stretch.
- Never exercise or stretch to the point of pain. In other words, **avoid exercises or sports that causes you more pain or weakness.**



As your back gets stronger, your health care provider can give you pointers on ways to add intensity to your exercise routine. Depending on the kind of back pain you have, you may require a referral to physical therapy in addition to your exercise routine. Physical therapists can also show you how to use the right technique when doing certain exercises.



## Other resources and exercise tips for your back

The following organizations offer tutorials, helpful illustrations and video demonstrations of exercises that can help strengthen and stretch your back and core muscles.

- American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons' Low Back Pain Exercise Guide  
<http://orthoinfo.aaos.org/topic.cfm?topic=a00302#Initial%20Exercise%20Program>
- Mayo Clinic's Slide show: Back pain exercises in 15 minutes a day  
[www.mayoclinic.com/health/back-pain/lb00001\\_d](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/back-pain/lb00001_d)
- Spine Universe, Back Pain Exercise  
Video: Pelvic Tilt  
[www.spineuniverse.com/conditions/back-pain/back-pain-exercise-video-pelvic-tilt](http://www.spineuniverse.com/conditions/back-pain/back-pain-exercise-video-pelvic-tilt)
- University of Michigan Low Back Pain Exercises  
[www.med.umich.edu/1libr/guides/Adult%20LBP%20Exercises.pdf](http://www.med.umich.edu/1libr/guides/Adult%20LBP%20Exercises.pdf)
- US Library of Medicine resources  
The Patient Education Institute  
[www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/tutorials/backexercises/hp319103.pdf](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/tutorials/backexercises/hp319103.pdf)
- WebMD, Low Back Pain: Exercises to reduce pain  
[www.webmd.com/back-pain/exercises-to-reduce-low-back-pain](http://www.webmd.com/back-pain/exercises-to-reduce-low-back-pain)  
Video demos: [www.webmd.com/video/best-back-exercises](http://www.webmd.com/video/best-back-exercises)