Oh, My Aching Back!

Almost everyone experiences some type of back pain at some point in time. The pain may occur suddenly and be gone within a couple of days or weeks, or it may occur repeatedly, never completely going away, and can have a major impact on your regular daily activities.

What causes back pain?

For many people, back pain can be caused by poor posture and bad habits.

The accumulated wear and tear our bodies experience on a day-to-day basis puts us at risk of experiencing back pain, regardless of occupation. This increases with age as the spine begins to lose its flexibility. Routine activities like gardening, housework, picking up a child, reaching for an object or even coughing, can trigger an episode of acute back pain: pain that can last for hours, days or even years. Do some shoulder circles, trunk rotation, and heel/toe stands. You might even ‘rehearse’ movements, like raking, as part of your warm-up. Then, take a few minutes to do the following stretches, and repeat them again at the end of your gardening activity. If you begin to feel a bit stiff while gardening, pause and do more stretches.

How your back works

Your back is a complex system of interlocking components:

- The bones or vertebrae that make up the spinal column are separated by discs, which act as shock absorbers that support and distribute the weight of your body.
- The spinal cord is housed and protected within the spinal column and major nerves, connecting the spinal cord with other parts of the body, pass through spaces between the vertebrae.
- The spinal column is wrapped tightly in ligaments and supported by muscle.

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Lifting – with your feet shoulder-width apart, bend your hips and knees, keeping your back as straight as possible. Grip the load firmly and hold it close to your body, tighten your stomach muscles and use the strong muscles of your legs as you lift the object. Keep your back straight and avoid twisting - point your feet in the direction you want to go.

Posture – think tall with your chest lifted, shoulders relaxed, chin tucked in and level. Posture should be stable, balanced and relaxed when sitting, walking or standing.

Sitting – don’t sit for long periods of time; stand up, stretch and walk around. Use a back support in your chair if necessary but make sure it fits you.

Exercise – a healthy body-weight puts less strain on your back. Your physiotherapist can show you how to keep your back flexible and strong with correct back and stomach exercises.

Driving – position your car seat so your back is supported and your legs are relaxed and slightly bent. If you need extra lower back support, use a lumbar roll or a rolled-up towel.

Sleeping – your mattress should be firm enough to support your spine in a neutral position – no sagging! Consider adding a layer of foam for added support.
Physiotherapy Can Help
Physiotherapists are skilled in the management of back injuries. A physiotherapist will provide a comprehensive assessment of your back to determine the source of the problem, and to develop an individualized program to treat your symptoms.

Depending upon the nature and severity of the back problem, the program may include:

- A variety of manual therapy techniques such as mobilization or manipulation;
- Exercises to mobilize or strengthen appropriate muscles;
- Postural retraining and general conditioning;
- Education in proper body mechanics and techniques to prevent recurrence of the back injury; and
- Modalities such as TENS, ultrasound, heat or ice to reduce pain.

Find a Physiotherapist
The Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA) represents physiotherapists, physiotherapist assistants and physiotherapist students across Canada. CPA members are rehabilitation professionals dedicated to the health, mobility and fitness of Canadians.

Physiotherapists are primary health care professionals who combine their in-depth knowledge of the body and how it works with specialized hands-on clinical skills to assess, diagnose and treat symptoms of illness, injury or disability.

More than 20,000 registered physiotherapists work in Canada, in private clinics, general and rehabilitation hospitals, community health centres, residential care and assisted-living facilities, home visit agencies, workplaces, and schools.