



*Ask Dr. Sue your health and safety questions*

## Oh Those Aching Backs

by Susan S. Aronson, MD

Child care is rough on caregivers' backs. When you care for young children, you must lift, squat at child level, and use child-sized furniture some of the time. Once you injure your back, these activities slow down healing and increase the risk of injuring yourself again. Back injuries are a common cause of workmen's compensation claims. By concentrating on posture, using good body mechanics when doing potentially injurious activities, keeping fit, and wearing back supports for particularly stressful work, child care staff can save their backs.

### **All child care staff need to practice good back care.**

Look at yourself in the mirror. How do you stand? Is your belly out, your head forward? How do you sit? Do you slouch so your shoulders hang out over your lap? These are common postures people assume. When your head, neck, and back bones are not lined up over your pelvis, you put strain on your back.

Check yourself by standing against a wall. Push your head, shoulders, pelvis, and heels against the wall. Now walk away from the wall holding that position. If you do this exercise correctly, you line up your

bones the way you should walk around all the time. Most people feel funny when they line themselves up against a wall this way. If you look at yourself in a full-length mirror right after you line yourself up, you'll see that your appearance has improved and that you are

walking upright. You will find walls everywhere that you can use to check your posture.

When you sit in a chair, get your hips under your shoulders and your head lined up over your shoulders. Sometimes this means sitting for-

### **Exercises to Strengthen Your Back**

Starting to do back exercises in bed is a good excuse to linger a few moments under the covers. Finish off on the floor next to the bed and bounce through your day with less risk of back injury.

**Exercise #1.** Lie on your back and pull in your abdominal muscles. Try to take the curve out of the small of your back by pressing the small of your back (lumbar area) tightly against the mattress. Hold this position for 10 seconds by counting 1001, 1002, . . . 1010. Repeat the exercise as often as you can until you can't hold your back pressed against the mattress for the full count of 10 seconds. You will find you can do more each morning. When you can do 20 before you tire, stick with 20 or you'll never get out of bed!

**Exercise #2.** Before you throw on your clothes or your robe for breakfast, drop on your hands and knees beside your bed. Let your head fall between your shoulders. Gently roll your head around. Shrug your shoulders a few times, then arch your back and pull in your abdominal muscles (like a cat) to stretch the muscles and connective tissues in your back. Hold this position for 10 seconds by counting 1001 . . . 1010 as before. Repeat as often as you can before you tire, up to 10 times.

**Exercise #3.** To finish getting ready for the day, do just one more type of exercise. Roll over on your back with both legs slightly bent at the knee and your feet on the floor. Put your arms by your sides and lift one knee toward your head at the same time that you lift your head, as if looking closely at your knee. Keep the other leg in position with the foot resting on the floor. Hold this position, stretching gently without straining, for a 10 second count. Repeat this exercise 10 times with each leg.

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ward on a chair rather than slouched back into it. Actually, you will feel less tired sitting at the edge of a chair with good posture than if you sink into a chair without proper back support.

If you think about and check your posture several times a day, you will begin to walk and sit with less strain on your back more of the time.

Being overweight also puts strain on your back. With too much padding in the belly area, you have to compensate by putting a larger curve into your back when you stand and sit. You also have to bear the pressure of the extra weight on the soft, spongy tissues (discs) between the bones of your back (vertebrae).

The discs are shock absorbers for the spine. As you age, they naturally become compressed and less resilient. If the ligaments that hold them in place tear during a stressful activity, a part of a disc can pop through the torn area and press on nearby nerves. This is called a ruptured or herniated disc.

Lifting in a way that exceeds the strength of the back muscles is how people tear the small, connective tissue fibers that hold the back bones in place. In a second, you have committed yourself to weeks, months, or a lifetime of reoccurring back pain. Usually, young adults have more flexibility, elasticity, and strength than older people. However, even young people can exceed their limits and injure their backs. Keep fit and discipline yourself to avoid strain when you bend.

Keeping fit means keeping your back, leg, and abdominal muscles strong. The classic exercise regimen for back strengthening includes walking, swimming, and specific

exercises to tone and stretch back muscles. Most people who learn back exercises do them for awhile after a back injury, then forget to do them until the next bout with back pain. The exercises are simple (see box). You can start doing them every morning in bed. First, you should be sleeping on a very firm mattress. Turn your mattress over and around from time to time to avoid shaping a curve into the mattress with your body. When the mattress gets out of shape, replace it.

**Lift children only after you think about what you are going to do.**

Squat down with the child in front of you. Pull the child as close to your body as you can. Use one hand under the child and one around the child's body to grip the child securely. This way, if the child wiggles, the movement won't throw you off balance. Use the muscles in your legs to lift you and the child to a standing position, straight up, like an elevator. Reverse these movements to lower the child to the floor. Avoid any twisting or bending at the waist. Twisting and bending while lifting puts a lot of strain on your back.

If you must lean over to pick up a child from a crib or playpen, do it with as little strain on your back as possible. People who do this kind of lifting should consider wearing a back support all the time. You can buy a back support in many home improvement stores as well as in orthopedic supply houses. Get the child close to the edge over which you must lift. Bend your knees as much as you can, and use your legs instead of your back for as much of the lift as possible.

**Carry children and toys without bending your spine.**

The typical hip carry for children requires a tilt of the spine in the opposite direction to compensate for the weight of the child. Similarly, carrying toys or supplies on one side can be a problem.

Try to use balanced carrying techniques. Combine a fanny and waist-front pack to carry needed supplies. When you must carry children for a period of time, use a backpack to carry objects you would otherwise have to put in a tote bag and carry the child held closely against your chest. If you use a backpack to carry a child, put objects you have to carry in a pack that you put on your chest.

**Arrange the child care environment to avoid back strain.**

Try to pick furnishings that reduce the need for caregivers to lift children. Avoid those that require lifting from awkward positions. Buy cribs that have high mattress levels and sides that you can lower when you lift the child. Use a diaper-changing surface that is waist high. Arrange steps that toddlers can use to climb up to the diaper-changing table. Put one foot up on a ledge or foot stool when you must stand at the diaper-changing table for a long time. Be sure there is at least one adult-sized chair for each caregiver in every child care environment. Sitting on the floor with your legs crossed in front of you is okay for awhile, but hard to do all day. Without being costly, little modifications mean a lot to your back at the end of the day.

**Take injuries seriously and treat them properly.**

Doctors no longer think that prolonged bed rest helps back injuries. Usually, doctors recommend medication to ease the pain and muscle spasm and back support devices while the back heals. Walking,

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standing, and lying on your back with a pillow under the knees are good positions. Avoid sitting for long periods. When sitting, use a small (airline size) pillow in the small of your back to give the extra support that relieves the injured and weakened muscles.

Take care of your back. Back pain makes it hard to live a normal life and care for others.

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