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Back off! Easy ways to help that aching back

Q. At the end of my work day, my back is aching and stiff. I don't do any heavy lifting or manual labor. What can I do to feel better?

A. Many people with work-related back pain have desk jobs. While sitting and typing all day, we tend to drop our heads and necks forward. This causes our shoulders to slump forward, then the mid-back rounds and the lower back aches. Over time, the chest muscles shorten and tighten and back muscles become weak and slack.

To relieve this pain, you need to strengthen your back and the deepest muscles near your skeleton — the particular muscles associated with good posture — while stretching and mobilizing your chest and rib cage.

First check with your doctor to make sure your back condition is posture related (and not due to any other conditions) and then take these simple steps for immediate relief, long-term health and prevention.

- Breathe. We tend to hold our breath when thinking. Deep breathing stretches the muscles between the ribs while regular breathing releases a buildup of muscular tension and emotional stress.
- Get up and walk around often.
- Feet have a lot to do with back health; take care of them. Change shoes and/or socks in the middle of the day. Give yourself a foot rub. Wear high heels less often.
- Take five minutes periodically during your day to stretch out or do a couple of yoga poses.
- Have more than one chair. Switch chairs with your officemate halfway through the day or sit on an exercise ball.
- Vary how far away you sit from your desk during the day and occasionally adjust the height of your chair.
- Notice how your back and neck are feeling from time to time. If you are becoming stiff or sore, stretch out.

- Don't force yourself to sit with a straight back. Instead, soften your back muscles as you lengthen, breathe and let your bottom relax down into your chair.

I highly recommend finding a workout plan, like a yoga program, to care for back issues. Strengthening the back muscles is crucial in supporting your spine for long periods of time without pain. But simply being aware of how you're holding yourself throughout the day can also help break bad posture habits, release patterns of tension and bring length to your spine. ✨

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