Low Back Pain and What You Can Do!

Most people will have at least one backache in their life. While such pain or discomfort can happen anywhere in your back, the most common area affected is your low back. This is because the low back supports most of your body's weight.

Low back pain is the number two reason that Americans see their health care provider -- second only to colds and flu. As people age, bone strength and muscle elasticity and tone tend to decrease. The discs begin to lose fluid and flexibility, which decreases their ability to cushion the vertebrae. Pain can occur, for example, when you move suddenly, sit in one position for a long time, or have an injury or accident; lift something too heavy or overstretch, causing a sprain, strain, or spasm in one of the muscles or ligaments in the back. If the spine becomes overly strained or compressed, a disc may rupture or bulge outward. This rupture may put pressure on one of the more than 50 nerves rooted to the spinal cord that control body movements and transmit signals from the body to the brain. When these nerve roots become compressed or irritated, back pain results.

Obesity, smoking, stress, poor physical condition, posture inappropriate for the activity being performed, osteoarthritis (can cause you to limp or to change the way you walk leading to back pain) many hours at a computer or in a car and poor sleeping position also may contribute to low back pain.

What can you do?

If you suffer back pain from any of the above reasons there are simple changes you can do to try to reduce the pain. If you wake with back pain perhaps your mattress or box springs are too soft. A cheap ‘fix’ is a piece of hardboard under the mattress. If your hip or back takes a toll in the car, try raising your hips with a pillow and make sure your knees are lower than the hips as you drive. Strengthening and stretching the abdominal muscles and the low back (extensor) muscles will provide a support for the area of the low back. (See picture 1-2 for Abs, 3-4 for Back). Stretching the hamstrings prevents the over tight muscles of the back of the leg pulling on the back. And good posture is always essential; here’s a fun story; Marilyn Monroe used to pretend she held a penny between her ‘cheeks’ as she walked. It helped her takes smaller footsteps, using her whole foot (heel through to balls of the feet) and forced her to stand tall. Try it while waiting in line at a store, looking at artifacts in museums, washing up at the sink or simply moving about your daily life. The more you hold onto that penny the more gluteus and abdominal action you will have in protecting your ‘core’ which includes the low back.

Try some of the following stretches and strengthening exercises. I suggest if you have trouble getting onto the floor, then buy a cheap, firm, inch thick foam exercise mat to place on your bed.
1. Abdominal Strengthening Exercises

Laying FLAT on the floor (not on a roller as in the picture) or bed with just a small pillow for head support, bend knees with feet either in the air, as above, on a stool or on the floor. Press belly button into the mat and reach across to opposite knee. Do 8-12 on the left and repeat on the right. Rest and repeat 2 or 3 more times each side.
2. Pelvic Tilt and Bridge

The ‘Pelvic Tilt’ is a great way to strengthen abdominal muscles. Once you have mastered the ‘tilt’ you can perform tilts seated, standing, while reading in bed reading or anywhere! Below is the progression if you choose.

With the starting pelvic tilt position, progress by squeezing the gluts (there is that penny again) and lift the hips, hold and lower slowly making sure the belly button ends by pushing into the mat.
3. Low Back Strengthening Exercises

See below for the full progression of this leg lift back extension exercise.

Stretching for the back.

Please NOTE in the lower left hand picture with the ‘down’ arrow, it is not something I would suggest for you. Rather than arch the back before the cat stretch, just do the pelvic tilt and flatten the back. Depressed arching can cause low back discomfort.
4. Hamstring Stretch

Extending the leg as comfortably as you can stretches the back of the upper thigh, the hamstring muscles, which attach into the hip and can actively pull on the low back if too tight. You can use a towel to hook over your foot and pull your leg closer to your head if you need the extra length for flexibility purposes.

Tucking your knees in to your chest is a great stretch for the low back area.

Both of the above stretches can be done seated. If seated, just stretch out one leg, resting on the heel and lean into that leg. The tuck exercise can be done bringing one knee at a time into your chest while seated and leaning over and hugging that knee.