

## What's causing the pain?

# Back to basics



Dr Chris Reeves  
Osteopath

There's nothing worse than being struck down by crippling back pain. But determining the cause of the problem and taking preventative steps after treatment can help set your spinal problems straight

Consider yourself lucky if you haven't experienced back pain. Nearly 80 per cent of Australians will suffer it at some point in their lives, and we spend about \$1 billion annually on masseuses, physiotherapists, GPs and other healthcare professionals trying to fix it.

It can even be caused by seemingly harmless activities, such as sitting.

"The sitting position compresses the lower back and puts a lot of stress on the spine," says osteopath Dr Chris Reeves, spokesperson for the Australian Osteopathic Association.

Professor Jenny Keating from the Department of Physiotherapy at Monash University in Victoria adds, "The condition of back pain ranges from mildly annoying to a problem so severe that it prevents participation in usual activities."

Opinions vary about whether chiropractors, physios or osteopaths offer the best treatment, but Professor Keating says one thing is for certain – the people who get the best results are proactive in their treatment.

"The person who fixes back pain is the person *with* the back pain," she says.

However, identifying the main causes is the first step towards healing.

### Your job

If you spend all day sitting, there's a good chance you're setting yourself up for back troubles in the future.

"The discs that support the spine and provide the shock absorption are put under more load when you sit, so the muscles tighten up and the ligaments are stretched out," Dr Reeves explains.

Do you have a manual job? Then twisting while you're lifting things could harm your back.

"If an object is in front of you, bend down facing the object so you're not twisted," he suggests. "Lift the object, then turn and place it back down again, making sure you keep front-on to the object."

### Your body

The shape of your body can cause your back grief, particularly if you have large breasts, scoliosis (a sideways curve of the spine), kyphosis (upper back curving), osteoporosis or poor posture.

Most structural issues require individual guidance from a healthcare professional, but posture is something many people try to fix themselves.

### DON'T STOP MOVING

Exercise is key if you want to stave off back pain – even when you're at work or on the couch. "For every 30 minutes of sitting, do 30 seconds of movement," Dr Reeves says. "Stand up and rotate your head to the left and right, then roll your shoulders, bend the trunk from side to side and rotate a couple of times, then march on the spot for 10 seconds. It's amazing how much difference doing this can make over the course of the day."

"If you have back pain, pay attention to the postures that feel better and the postures that feel worse," advises musculoskeletal physiotherapist Martin Rabey from the Australian Physiotherapy Association.

"In some people, being too upright is as much of a problem as being slouchy is in other people, because the excessive muscle activity irritates spinal structures."

### Your environment

Your pillow, bed and couch can all play a part in supporting – or hindering – your back, but there's no perfect product for everyone.

"You can have a fantastic-looking chair but sit badly on it," Martin says. "Speak to a physiotherapist who can help you analyse what could be influencing your back health."

### Your head

It's easy to think of back pain as a purely physical phenomenon, but our mental state plays a big part.

"Stress sparks a fight-or-flight response that elevates muscle activity, particularly in the abdomen and back muscles, and that increases the physical load on the spine," Martin says. "It also changes the release of chemicals such as cortisol that influence our sensitivity to pain."



**TIME FOR ACTION**  
Exercise and keeping your weight under control helps keep back problems in check

## Claim your pain

Don't be embarrassed to tell your boss, family or friends about your back pain. "You are not a wimp," Professor Keating says. "Employers can help you if they empathise and offer the support of modified duties while you recover."

## Five-step treatment

- 1 Keep in shape**  
Overweight people have a much higher risk of back pain because the extra weight they're carrying puts pressure on the spine.
- 2 Look at the bigger picture**  
Consider how you use your body every day and if stress could be contributing to back pain.
- 3 Keep moving**  
Don't head off to bed if you have a sore back – the best thing you can do is maintain gentle movement. "The trick is finding the balance of activities that gets you going, steadily doing more and more, without the problem flaring up," Professor Keating says.
- 4 Use painkillers**  
Speak to your doctor about pain relieving and muscle relaxant medication.
- 5 Use hot or cold packs**  
"If you injure yourself, cold is the best option," Martin says. "But if it's a long-standing problem, then either hot or cold packs can help. It just depends on what feels best for you."

## Feet first

Yours' resident podiatrist Jayne Arlett offers her tips for happy feet



I have terrible foot problems (bunions, low arch, arthritis) and the only shoes I find comfortable are also at least \$200 per pair. Are there affordable alternatives?

With shoes, you get what you pay for. So to get a shoe to meet your complex needs, you may well be at the \$200 mark. I prefer people with foot problems to invest in just a few quality shoes in basic colours (nude, tan and black) in classic styling (pump, sandal and flat), than to have a multitude of cheaper shoes that do more harm. See a qualified shoe fitter and/or get advice from a podiatrist, as inserts or orthotics may relieve any discomfort now and help prevent things from deteriorating as you get older. For casual shoes, The Athlete's Foot have qualified fit technicians with a great understanding of foot function and shoe fit. For more dressy shoes, see an experienced fitter in a specialist store. Your podiatrist may be able to refer you to someone in your area.

I've always loved wearing high heels but now they're just too uncomfortable. Are wedges better for my feet than heels?

Wedges can be more comfortable than heels. Wearing high heels is not a natural state: the heel is elevated, the ankle is angled, the pressure on the forefoot is astronomical and the toes are often forced into a narrow pointed shape! An on-trend wedge gives more stability and better balance, and you will find them at most good shoe stores. A platform or flatform shoe elevates the forefoot and heel, giving the perception of a higher heel without such a drop from the heel to the ball of the foot.