

# WV Wellness

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Mind, Body and Spirit

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## Top Ten Ways to Maintain a Healthy Back

We don't think very much about our backs—that is, until they start to hurt. And many of us are hurting as back pain is now one of the most common medical complaints in the U.S. The good news is that, in many cases, back pain can be prevented. Here are ACE's Top 10 ways to maintain a healthy back.

1. **Maintain a healthy weight.** Excess weight tends to creep up slowly, so we may not be aware of how it affects us. But try carrying a 20-pound pack on your back all day and you'll have a better idea of how extra weight takes a toll on the whole body.
2. **Strengthen the abdominal and back muscles.** You've heard it before, but strengthening the abdominals really does help protect the back. In fact, a strong core—which includes all the muscles of the trunk—is important for avoiding injury, whether you're cleaning your house, playing tennis or sitting at a desk all day.
3. **Lift items properly.** Protect your back when lifting anything by standing close to the object with your feet apart to give you a stable base. Squat down while keeping the spine in proper alignment and contract your abdominals as you lift using your legs.
4. **Strengthen the leg muscles.** Along with the core muscles, the leg muscles play a vital role in helping you maintain good posture and body mechanics. And strong leg muscles can take much of the burden off the back when you're lifting heavy items (see above).



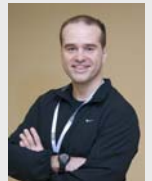
Willamette View

### TIPS FROM THE TRAINER

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#### Exercise Guidelines: Frequency, Intensity and Duration

Do moderately intense aerobic exercise 30 minutes a day, five days a week.

**Or**

Do vigorously intense aerobic exercise 20 minutes a day, 3 days a week.

**And**

Do eight to 10 strength-training exercises, 10-15 repetitions of each exercise twice to three times per week.

**And**

If you are at risk of falling, perform balance exercises.

**And**

Have a physical activity plan. Both aerobic and muscle-strengthening activity is critical for healthy aging. Moderate-intensity aerobic exercise means working hard at about a level-six intensity on a scale of 10. You should still be able to carry on a conversation during exercise.

Seeing a professional can really help in developing your comprehensive activity plan. This will maximize the benefits of physical activity and ensure your safety.

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5. **Stay flexible.** Inflexibility in the form of tight hamstrings and a limited range of motion in the trunk can increase your risk of injury or make existing back pain worse. Some forms of exercise, such as yoga, Pilates and tai chi, may help relieve or prevent back pain by increasing flexibility and reducing tension. These exercises should not be done, however, if they are uncomfortable or place a strain on the back.
6. **Maintain good posture.** Correct posture and body mechanics play a vital role in preventing back pain because pressure on the discs and strain of the muscles, ligaments and back joints is aggravated by incorrect posture and body mechanics. When your posture is good and you move your body correctly, you reduce the strain on your back.
7. **Buy a comfortable mattress.** Most of us spend a good deal of time in bed, which is why a good mattress is such a wise investment. Do some research, test the mattress out at the store and ask for recommendations. Remember—what works for one person may not work for you so take the time to find the mattress that suits your needs.
8. **Reduce stress.** Stress increases tension in all your muscles including your back. Reduce or better manage your stress and you may literally feel as if the weight has been lifted from your shoulders.
9. **Warm up before activity.** Beginning any activity with cold muscles and joints puts you at risk for injury. Jumping right into intense activity increases your risk of injury, so take the time to get your muscles and joints warm and limber first.
10. **Support the lower back when sitting.** Use a rolled towel, small pillow or specially designed seat support available at medical supply stores. Remove the support every half hour for five minutes to give your lower back a change of position. After sitting for a prolonged period, straighten your back to an upright position and, if possible, stand and walk around to give your back a break.

