



I'll Be Back *By Joe Stein, President*



Didn't you hate it when you shoveled snow this winter and had a sore chest the next day? How about when you unloaded those forty pound bags of dog food from your trunk then had sore abs for a week? When we lift too heavy, perform unusual activities, slouch too much or stand too long, our backs cry out, "The pain lamp is lit, misery ahead."

According to the American Council on Exercise, nearly 80% of Americans have experienced low back pain. It is a major cause of job disability and the most frequent cause of activity limitations for people under 45 years old. The cost in the US due to permanent disability and lost wages has been estimated to be \$75 billion per year.

Low back pain can be caused by several factors:

- Abnormalities in the skeletal structure
- Weak abdominal muscles
- Postural imbalances
- Tight hamstring muscles
- Tight low back extensor muscles

Prior to beginning an exercise program, have a complete physical exam. Back pain requires an accurate diagnosis. Pain from structural abnormalities may require medical intervention. Physical therapy may also be required. If you have been cleared by your doctor, get ready to workout: Most research supports the efficacy of exercise to reduce low back pain. The spine is intrinsically unstable. It is the muscles of your core that provide stability.

A well-designed exercise program will involve a warm-up, strengthening weak muscles and stretching tight ones. The back is a large, multifaceted and often neglected part of one's body. Think of your back as having three separate zones: upper back, mainly the trapezius group, the middle back, primarily the latissimus dorsi and the low back, chiefly the erector spinae. A basic yet balanced exercise program might include dumbbell shrugs, one-arm rows, deadlifts, bent-over rows and low-back extensions. Yes, you need to do it all! As children we are taught "...the knee bone is connected to the thigh bone. The thigh bone is connected to the hip bone..." Today we would call it a kinetic chain. Each link must be strong, flexible and balanced. If a weak link exists, it cannot be kicked off the skeleton; instead it stays and may become the site of future pain or injuries.

The chain does not include only muscles of the back. Weak, tight hamstrings often cause low back discomfort. Squats, lunges, leg curls, and butt busters will strengthen weak hamstrings. Deep stretching after working the hamstrings is critical.

Weak muscles in the abs, particularly, the transversus abdominis and rectus abdominis often cause poor posture. The extra weight of a “spare tire,” plus poor posture conspire to tilt the hips forward, thus placing strain on the low back extensor area. The best friends your low back can have are strong abdominal muscles. Crunches, cat-camel exercises, bicycle maneuvers, low tummy tighteners and side sit-ups are some great exercises to deflate that spare tire. Nutritional guidance designed to reduce fat storage is also in order. The ability to maintain proper posture is also important for a healthy, pain-free back.

How can I improve my posture? What food choices do I need to make? How do I begin an exercise program? The first thing you need to exercise is your right to get help from a fitness professional! After all, if the answers were obvious and the fixes easy, you wouldn't be popping aspirin and walking like Quasimodo after each trip to the garden center.

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