

The good back guide: what the experts do to beat the pain

Almost 80 per cent of us suffer back pain at some point in our life. What can we do to have healthier backs?

Angela Epstein asked leading osteopaths, chiropractors and physiotherapists

Britain is in the grip of a back pain crisis. A survey by the British Chiropractic Association (BCA) this week revealed that three quarters of us (77 per cent) are affected at some point in our lives, with nearly a quarter suffering daily.

So have we brought this so-called epidemic on ourselves? It only takes a glance at our daily habits to see where we might be going wrong. A recent study found that almost half of the nation admits to eating on their lap, 40 per cent complain that they sit at a desk all day and more than a third admit to watching television or films in bed. The evidence that our lifestyle is driving the problem is overwhelming.

"People often think they must have done something to injure themselves — they may say that they felt their back go when they were picking something up," says Tim Allardyce, a chartered physio-

Lower back pain

Known as mechanical back pain, its hallmark is a dull, thudding ache or clenching feeling at the bottom of your spine, which sometimes flares into your buttocks. It usually feels better as soon as you rest. The main causes are lack of exercise, slouching and poor posture.

"The body needs mobility," says Tim Allardyce. "Our spines are comprised of 26 mobile blocks of bone (vertebrae) which rotate, bend, extend and are designed for movement. So when our spines don't get the movement they require, the joints in the spine become stiff. This causes muscle spasm, pain and can lead to problems."

Treatment and prevention

The days of strict bed rest are long gone. Instead, the focus needs to be on relieving the pain and getting moving.

Exercising and working out helps to strengthen the spinal muscles which help to support the back, according to Allardyce. "Working out also strengthens our core muscles, which provides a corset effect on the spine giving it stability."

Using anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen may help and there is also a natural alternative — in the form of the fairly innocuous rosehip. "There's now a large body of evidence supporting the use of Gopo — a compound derived from rosehip — in musculoskeletal conditions, with research indicating that it can effectively relieve acute exacerbations of chronic back pain," says Dr Rod Hughes, consultant rheumatologist at St Peter's Hospital,

therapist and registered osteopath. "But often it's sedentary habits and lifestyle — lack of exercise, weight gain or just not moving around enough — which are finally taking their toll."

According to the BCA survey 82 per cent of people now spend up to six hours a day in front of a computer screen, while 49 per cent admitted spending up to six hours a day watching television.

Sammy Margo, a chartered physiotherapist, says that we have simply become less physical. "Our grandparents walked everywhere. Now we use cars. Or we don't go out at all, but sit in front of a screen. That's why I'm treating so much backache, along with 'text thumb' injuries or 'mouse shoulder' from people spending hours on their devices. The internet has stopped people moving."

Everyone is different and our backs how the strain in different ways. So how do you know what kind of pain is affecting you? And how to treat it?



Surrey. Gopo capsules are available over the counter.

In terms of getting moving, swimming is ideal as it doesn't put any pressure on the joints, adds Sammy Margo. So too is Pilates to improve flexibility and strengthen back muscles.

At work, get up every 30 minutes to walk around and stretch your muscles. Back at your desk, watch your posture. "Sit up with your back straight, your shoulders down and back, and elbows relaxed at your sides," says Ian Harding, a consultant orthopaedic surgeon at Spire Bristol Hospital. "Your buttocks should touch the back of the chair. And avoid crossing your legs. Your keyboard should be directly in front of you, with the mouse by its side, and your phone close to you to avoid repetitive reaching. You should be able to keep your wrists straight, shoulders relaxed and elbows by your side while using it."

As well as regular gentle exercise, reflexology may be as effective as painkillers for the condition. A study by the University of Portsmouth found those who had the treatment felt about 40 per cent less pain.

Acupuncture is also recommended for persistent, non-specific lower back pain.

Upper back pain

Though it can be caused by sleeping in an awkward position or spending too much time at your desk, upper back (and neck pain) can sometimes happen because of anxiety and stress as tension causes the neck muscles to contract. Over a period of time, nerves, muscles and ligaments become stretched, which causes strain and leads to pain and inflammation.

"Repetitive forward neck bending while sitting at our desk is one of the most common issues," says Tim Allardyce. "We all tend to look down too much, and this causes the muscles and ligaments at the back of our neck and upper back to lengthen, reducing the support to the head, and leaving the neck and upper back susceptible to pain and problems."

Treatment and prevention

The simplest thing to do would be to learn to relax — perhaps trying meditation or yoga which will help the muscles to unclench. A study by the University of York, funded by Arthritis Research UK, found that people offered a specially designed 12-week yoga programme experienced greater improvements in back function and more confidence in performing everyday tasks than those offered conventional forms of GP care (yogaforbacks.co.uk).

There is often a tipping point for backache when it moves from a dull ache to something acute and enduring. "These are often situational changes," says Sammy Margo. "Maybe you've started a stressful new job, put on a lot of weight, are getting divorced — and quite simply, the back can't handle it."

As with all backache, when it's at the acute, super-painful stage use ice on the area for about 20 minutes every few hours for two to three days, suggests Allardyce. "After that, go for 'contrast bathing' — that is alternating 5-10 minutes of ice with 20 minutes of heat, such as a hot water bottle — to ease the muscles and relieve inflammation."

Avoid using two pillows as you sleep as it will overstretch your upper back and neck muscles. Chiropractor Rishi Loatey says: "You want to keep the spine in a neutral position. If you are using two pillows you are probably forcing the neck into a bent forward position."

"It's important to keep the neck mobile, to strengthen the muscles and improve your range of movement," says Allardyce. "Every couple of hours, look over your left and right shoulder to mobilise the neck and then tip your head, taking your ear down to your shoulder. This should release the pain in your neck and upper back."

Cradling the phone in the crook of your neck, or peering down at your iPad or Kindle can overstretch back and neck muscles. "This presents as a deep muscle ache across the tops of the shoulders. This is due to muscle fatigue in the trapezius muscle, and when this muscle becomes fatigued from overuse, it gets very sore," Allardyce says.

"The simplest thing to do is go hands-free or use a head set," Loatey says. "When you do use your Kindle, hold it up with your arm rather than having it in your lap. Keeping your eyes looking straight ahead while using any of these type of devices corrects and straightens the spine."



Sciatic pain

The sciatic nerve is the longest in the body, running from the lower back, branching through the buttocks, and all the way down both legs, ending at the feet. So if anything compresses or irritates it, this causes pain that radiates out from the lower back and travels down the leg.

"Triggers include wearing high heels, putting on weight and pregnancy as this can put a load on your facet joints," says the chiropractor Tim Hutchful. "If you are sitting slouched, over time this can cause the discs in your back to bulge, which may lead to leg or sciatic pain."

Treatment and prevention

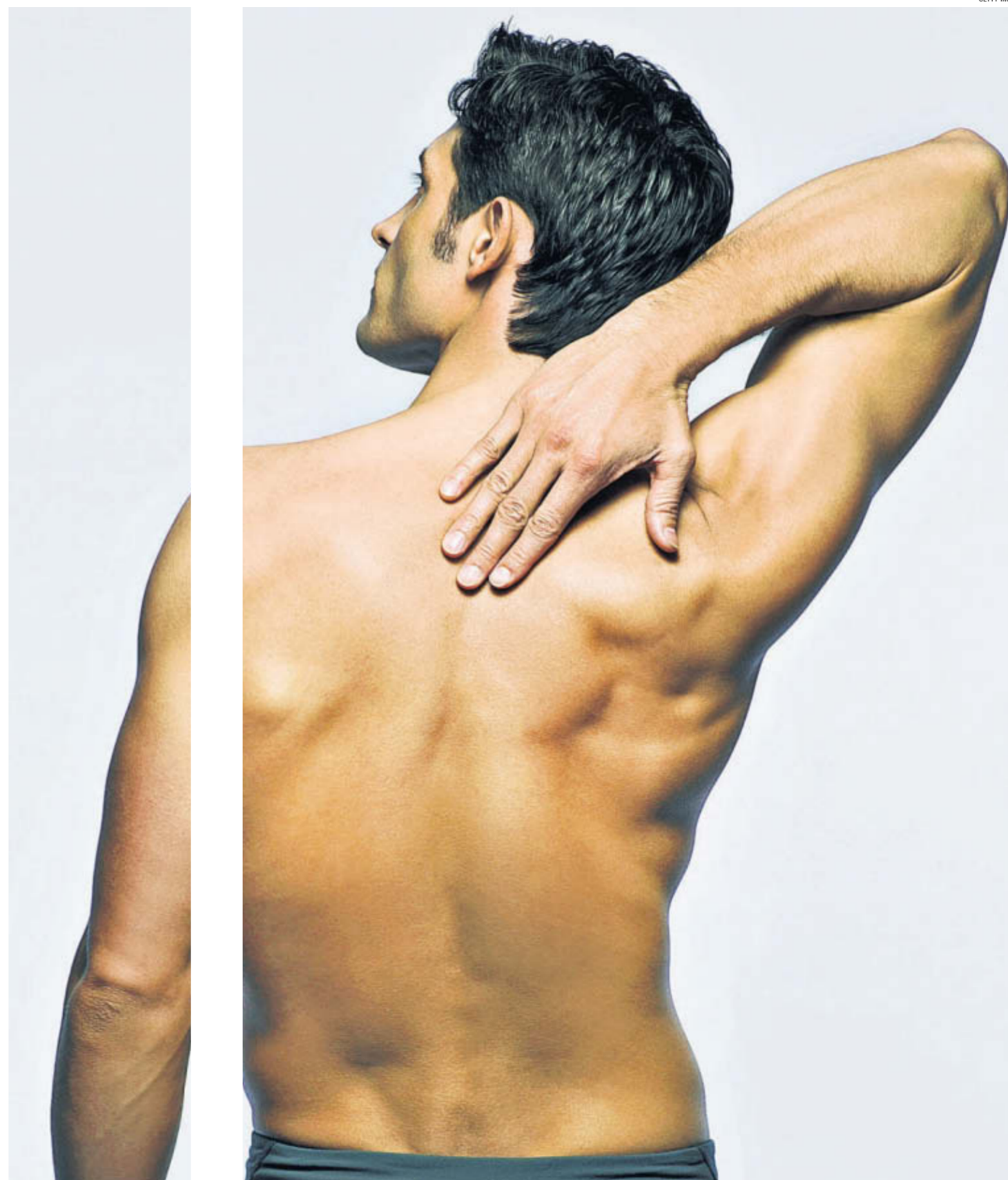
Anti-inflammatories combined with physiotherapy will help. Lying on your side in a foetal position with a pillow between your legs should offer some relief. Do this until the pain settles down.

Soft tissue massage can help by increasing circulation, relaxing muscle spasm and triggering the release of endorphins — the body's natural pain relievers.

Once the pain starts to subside it's important to start getting active slowly, through walking, swimming and gentle stretching. Be mindful of your posture. "Remember to avoid the hunch," says Hutchful. "When our back is in a 'C' shape it creates curvature of the spine, puts more pressure on the disc and may cause it to weaken and bulge. You should be creating an 'S' shape with your back."



“So have we brought this so-called epidemic on ourselves?”



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will still function as a paperclip. People think they have a new injury but it is in fact the result of years of desk work. Their injury is caused by what's known as postural fixity — being stuck in one place." Heavy lifting and driving for long periods of time also increase risk.

Though quite rare, if you hear a sudden crack in your back, get it checked immediately. It could be down to some form of vertebral collapse, though this is usually as a result of severe injury or an underlying issue such as the bone-thinning condition osteoporosis.

Treatment and prevention

The pain can be severe and you may need something prescribed by your GP if over-the-counter anti-inflammatories and painkillers don't help. Very rarely a slipped disc can press on the spinal cord, giving pain down both legs and trouble urinating. If this happens, see a doctor urgently as you could have a serious condition known as cauda equina syndrome which, untreated, can lead to incontinence and being unable to walk.

It is very important that you keep active if you have a slipped disc. This boosts circulation so that blood carries oxygen and nutrients to the area to nourish the joint and prevent the condition getting worse. If you are in severe pain you may need to rest completely for the first couple of days. However, after this period, you should, under medical advice, start to move around as soon as you can.

"Gentle cycling is good as the moderate rhythmic movements keep your back moving," adds Sammy Margo. But avoid high-impact activities, such as running and aerobics.

Pain and stiffness in the morning

Over time cartilage breaks down between the joints in the back, which creates pain and inflammation. Small growths on the bone called osteophytes then form and try to re-stabilise the joint, which can cause irritation. The condition, spinal arthritis, causes stiffness on getting out of bed in the morning — often called "first movement pain" — which eases off during the day as you move around.

The condition is more common as we head into middle age as the body is simply not as forgiving. "Our backs don't have the same bounce or spring," Margo says.

Treatment and prevention

A physiotherapist can suggest specific and regular exercises to relieve the condition. Your bed might also need reviewing — especially if your partner weighs more than you since it will affect the support of the mattress. Opt for two single mattresses zipped together if you can't bear to be apart. There's no evidence that a firm mattress is any better at helping to deal with back pain. Just get one that feels comfortable. Sleeping with a small pillow between the knees may help symptoms at night.

You could also try standing on one leg while you are brushing your teeth, Hutchful says. "This works the core stability muscles which protect our back and which don't get used enough — particularly if you have a sedentary lifestyle," he says.

"This exercise also helps to restore balance and improve posture, since we often have a tendency to lean to one side. Stand on your left leg first until you start to feel too wobbly and then do the same with the right."

The back experts

Garry Trainer is an osteopath and the go-to healer for celebrities such as Stella McCartney, Emma Thompson and Gwyneth Paltrow, who said that "at the end of a treatment one feels entirely put back together". £100 for a one-hour consultation garrytrainer.com

Tim Allardyce is a physiotherapist and osteopath who treats some of the UK's top sports players including Olympians and international football players, using techniques such as laser and ultrasound, massage and spinal manipulation. £38 for 30 minutes croydonthphysio.co.uk

Thomas Jeppesen is a chiropractor who uses traditional methods alongside other treatments such as acupuncture counselling and psychotherapy at clinics in Leicester and Mansfield. He has been on hand for the British team at events such as the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and the Winter Olympics in Turin in 2006. £55 for an initial one-hour session; £30 thereafter healthonhand.co.uk

Sam Kankanamge is an osteopath with more than 20 years of experience in holistic healthcare. He uses acupuncture, energetic healing, ayurvedic-yogic and chi-gong techniques alongside osteopathy, and also has practices in the Hollywood Hills, Los Angeles and Sri Lanka. £70 for one hour breathoflifeclinic.co.uk

Sammy Margo is a chartered physiotherapist who works with clients to improve the body's ability to heal and look after itself through massage, postural correction, spinal manipulation and core stability programmes. £50 for 30 minutes sammymargophysiotherapy.com

Amy Ku Redler is a specialist in yoga and pilates with 20 years of experience. She treats clients at home with tailored sessions and offers holistic and ayurvedic massage, as well as longer residential yoga retreats. Clients include politicians and stressed city workers. £95 for a one-hour home visit thelifecentre.com

Back-strengthening exercises see next page