

Stretch and Stay Fit for a Stronger Back

BY JIM MERRITT

Back pain is one of the most common ailments, affecting 31-million Americans at any given time and costing more than \$50-billion annually in medical expenses, according to the American Chiropractic Association.

But it's also mostly preventable, if you stay fit and avoid back-straining activities, say medical experts.

"Most people will have acute low back pain due to muscular strain at some point in their lives," says Dr. Daniel Birk, director of the Neurosurgery Spine Center at Stony Brook Medicine. Birk says the "biggest factor contributing to low back injuries is leading an unhealthy lifestyle."

Reduce your chance of having spinal disease by maintaining a healthy weight and diet, exercising and "avoiding smoking and traumatic injuries which can occur when under the influence of drugs or alcohol," says Birk.

COMMON CAUSES OF BACK PAIN

Dr. Keith Solomon of Advanced Chiropractic says the most common back injuries are sprains and strain suffered at work, home or during exercise or leisure activities.

"If you know you're going to be watching your grandkids or doing yard

cleanup or snow shoveling, I highly recommend a lumbar support back brace, which supports your lower back muscles, and makes you less prone to injury," Solomon says.

Spinal disc degeneration from the normal aging process, and herniated or ruptured discs, are also contributing factors which should be addressed by a physician, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.

Most cases of low back pain last from four to 12 weeks, but about 20 percent of people who suffer acute low back pain develop chronic symptoms that last longer, according to the institute.

Among the most common symptoms is sciatica, a burning pain caused by compression of the sciatic nerve traveling through the buttocks down the back of the leg, medical experts say.

FOLLOW DOCTORS' ORDERS

Birk says that most back pain can be lessened, and recovery sped up, by resting and taking over-the-counter, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications. If back pain persists, a physical therapist can prescribe special exercises and treatments.

"If low back pain or leg pain does not improve after six weeks of conservative treatment, the primary physician can refer you to a specialist such as a neurosurgeon," Birk says. Surgery for degenerative conditions is a last resort after other treatments such as epidural steroid injections, Birk says.

5 STEPS FOR SAFE LIFTING

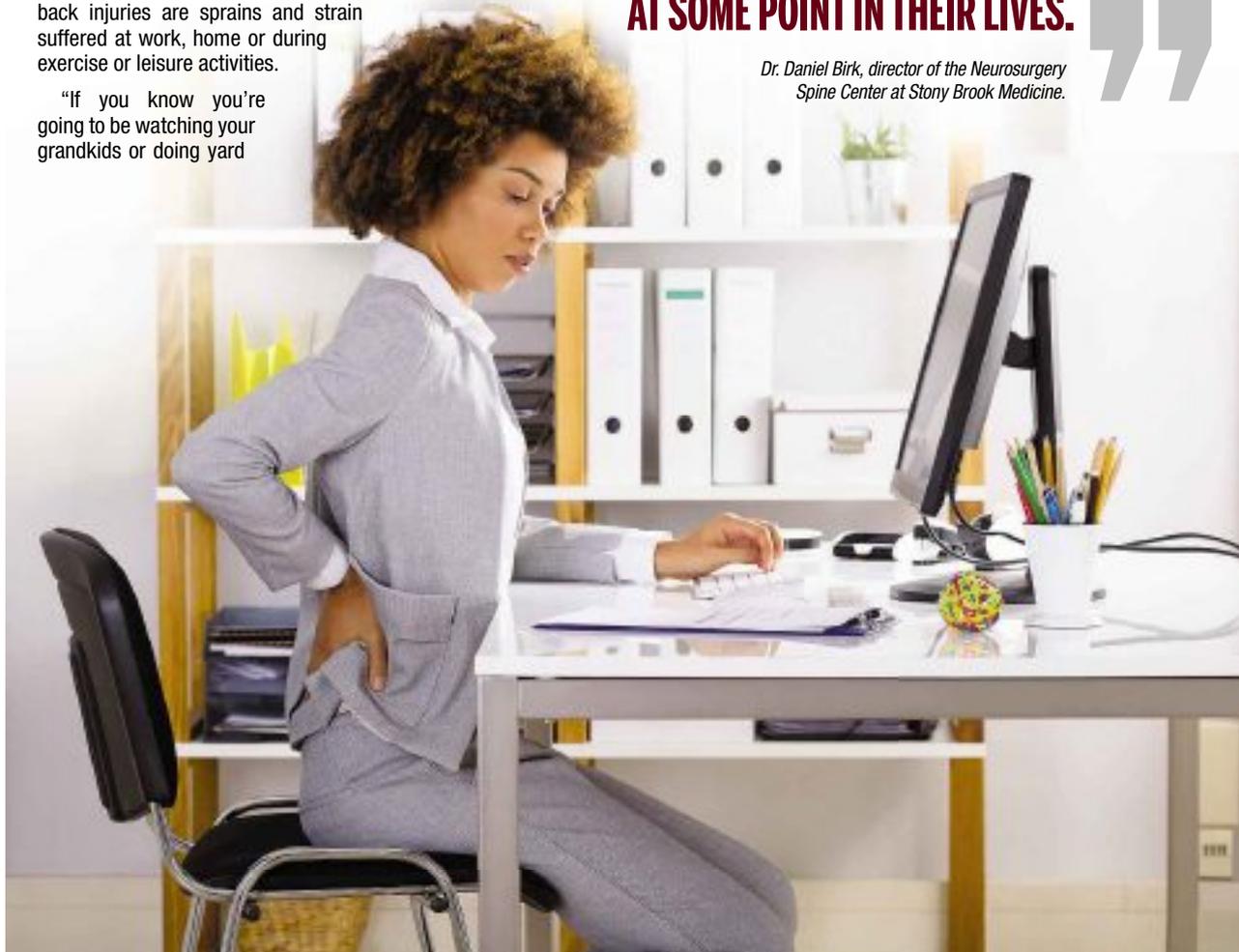
Bending at the waist to pick up and move a heavy box can cause a back injury. Avoid pain by following these basic lifting guidelines:

- 1)** Clear your path of obstructions that could cause you to trip, slip or fall.
- 2)** Gauge how heavy the object is by lifting up a corner. If it's too heavy to lift alone, ask for help. Wear gloves to protect your hands.
- 3)** With feet shoulder-width apart, squat down as close as possible to the load, and get a secure grip. Lift gradually using your legs, hugging the load close to your chest and keeping your back and neck straight.
- 4)** Once standing, change direction by pointing your feet and turn your whole body. Avoid twisting at your waist.
- 5)** Lower the load gradually, again using only your legs and with your back and neck straight, until you are in a squatting position.

Source: New York State Insurance Fund (nysif.com)

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STRETCHING SAVES YOUR LOWER BACK

These exercises stretch and strengthen your lower back muscles, and can be done at work or home:

- Sit up straight and imagine you have a cable attached to the top of your head. Feel the cable slowly pull you up higher and higher. Hold for a few seconds. Relax.
- Chair Back Stretch. Lean forward to stretch, keep your head down and your neck relaxed, hold 10-20 seconds, and use your hands to push yourself upright.
- Stand with hands on your hips keeping your knees slightly flexed, gently turn your torso at the waist and look over your shoulder until you feel the stretch and hold 8-10 seconds. Repeat other side.

Source: New York State Public Employees Federation Office Ergonomics Resource Guide

MAINTAIN A HEALTHY DIET AND BODY WEIGHT... to avoid and reduce back pain, doctors say. Find out how much you need to slim down by using the Body Mass Index (BMI) calculator at nhlbi.nih.gov. If you need to reduce, consult the weight loss diet tips at health.gov.

BACKPACKS AND CHILDREN... Make sure your child's backpack weighs no more than 15 to 20 percent of their body weight. Overloading with schoolbooks and supplies can lead to injured muscles and posture problems.

Source: The American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons