- Pain

PREVENTION

WELLNESS



5 MYTHS ABOUT BACK PAIN

Your spine has a lot of nerve(s), which is why if you have a backbone, you're likely to experience some ouches in this area. Here's what to know.

BY KATE ROCKWOOD

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1

MYTH:

Stress has nothing to do with back pain.

MYTHBUSTER

Stress absolutely can cause back pain—one large-scale study found that severe stress was connected with a 2.8-fold increase in risk for chronic low-back pain. Here's why: The stress response causes muscles to tense up, and chronically taut muscles can cause head, neck, shoulder, and back pain. Stress can also negatively impact sleep, make posture worse, and cause inflammation throughout the body, says Jonathan Guymon, a chiropractor with Gateway to Wellness Chiropractic in Cedar Park, TX. "Low-back pain issues are often issues of a sedentary, high-stress lifestyle," he says. "So get up and move, especially your spine, and practice ways to help your body handle stress, such as breathing techniques."

2

MYTH:

If it really hurts, something is seriously wrong.

MYTHBUSTER

Severe back pain doesn't always mean a severe problem. A minor issue like a pulled muscle can sometimes hurt a lot. "You have the highest amount of sensory nerve receptors in your spine compared with the rest of your body," says Kyle Gill, a chiropractor with Body Science Therapy in Ontario, Canada. "It is also very challenging not to use your back and thereby avoid the pain." The tell that it's no biggie: A less serious back issue typically doesn't drastically limit movement and begins to feel better after a few days, Gill says. Seek treatment if you have severe pain that doesn't decrease after three days and/or travels down your leg, changes in bowel or bladder function, or numbness, tingling, or weakness. Those can be symptoms of a herniated disc or another condition that may not get better on its own.

3

MYTH:

A very firm mattress is the smartest choice for a bad back.

MYTHBUSTER

Not always— medium-firm is often best. A mattress should be soft enough to allow your shoulders to sink in slightly, according to recent research, but not so soft that your hips and shoulders sink too deep, causing spinal misalignment. "Too soft a mattress doesn't give enough support, whereas one that is too hard gives you pressure points," says John Hendrickson, P.T., owner of Sport Clinic Physical Therapy in Mequon, WI. How you sleep also makes a difference. "Back sleepers do best with firmer mattresses, while side sleepers need slightly more give," Gill says. Many companies allow you to try a mattress at home, so test one out. Try it out in a store, or if you order online, choose one that gives you several months to decide whether to keep it.



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4

MYTH:

It's easy to trace back pain to its cause.

MYTHBUSTER

About 90% of lower-back pain can't be tied to something specific like a tumble down stairs. It is often caused by multiple factors that can include poor posture, a sedentary lifestyle, smoking, aging, genetic factors, and carrying a lot of body weight, says Cindy Jakubiec, a chiropractor and owner of Anchored in Health in Orland Park, IL.



GETTY IMAGES.

Conditions like arthritis, osteoporosis, scoliosis, and endometriosis can also cause pain, she adds. Fortunately, some back pain can be prevented by keeping your core muscles—the ones that support your spine—strong. Effective core exercises include planks and bridges, while stretching and yoga can help "keep the spine flexible and mobile," Jakubiec says. Good posture is critical too: Leave your feet on the floor while sitting, switch positions often, relax your shoulders, and keep your stomach pulled in.

5

MYTH:

After an injury, bed rest is best.

MYTHBUSTER **In most cases it's not.** While taking it easy for a couple of days can help with muscle strain or inflammation, staying in bed too long or for a different issue can prolong or worsen back pain. For example, with nerve compression or a disc problem, inactivity can tighten muscles, increase pain, and cause more weakness. As long as you're able, it's a good idea to try gentle stretches and movement as soon as you can, says Gill. Muscle strains and sprains of the spine can be treated with techniques like manual therapy that manipulate the spine or the soft tissue and can stop back problems from becoming more serious, says Hendrickson. It's a good idea to move gently if this is possible and to seek help if you are in severe pain.