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Oh my aching back!

(HealthDay News) --

Tips to Ease an Aching Back Holidays or any day, bad mechanics can lead to pain and stiffness

The holidays can be a real pain in the back. To ease the backaches that may have come from such seasonal duties as lugging heavy luggage, toting bags of gifts and stretching and straining to put up holiday decorations -- and that can return any time of the year -- the National Athletic Trainers' Association offers a 10-step guide:

Zero in on the causes. Do you have poor posture or weak, loose muscle tone? Use poor mechanics when lifting heavy items or just tend to lift too much at once? Learning good technique and strengthening your back can help. Use carts or lighten your load when lifting heavy items.

Get moving. Poor posture and muscle stiffness make it harder to move, which can lead to injury or pain. Add daily stretches or activities that increase flexibility and get the body moving in different directions -- yoga, tai chi, swimming or pilates, for example.

Increase strength. Building overall muscle helps balance and flexibility, which in turn reduces stress on the back. Focus on the core muscles of the stomach, back, hips and pelvis, but work out the legs and shoulders to help with squatting, lifting and carrying.

Add aerobic exercise. Walking, swimming and running for at least 20 minutes three times a week adds to muscular endurance and cardiovascular fitness while improving blood flow to the spine and decreasing stress.

Pay attention to posture. Avoid sitting or driving for long periods of time. Get up, move around and stretch every 15 to 30 minutes. When seated, keep your hips and knees at right angles to one another and use a chair with adequate lumbar (lower back) support.

Stand straight. Keep your head up, shoulders straight, chest forward and stomach tight. Avoid standing in the same position for too long, though.

Use proper lifting mechanics. When lifting objects from a position below the waist, start with a wide stance, bending slightly at the hips and knees. Tighten your stomach as you lift and keep your back straight; do not arch or bend. Carry heavy objects close to your body and avoid carrying objects on only one side of your body.

Get a good night's sleep. Pick a firm mattress and box spring that does not sag. Try to sleep in a position that maintains the natural curve of your back.

Warm-up. Before you exercise, engage in a low-impact activity to increase muscle temperature and mobility. This decreases your chance of injury.

Adopt a healthy lifestyle. Obesity and smoking increase the incidence of back pain. Improving your health will decrease the chance of back pain and improve your quality of life.