

# Back Pain? 7 Surprising Causes

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Most Americans (8 out of 10) will experience [back pain at some point](#) in their lives. But while that dull ache or sharp pain is an all-too-common problem, many of the causes are a mystery to us until the discomfort kicks in.

"Wear and tear on your discs is cumulative -- it all adds up," says Arya Nick Shamie, M.D., a spokesperson for the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons and an associate professor of spine surgery at the University of California - Los Angeles.

Watch out for these surprising culprits to keep existing pain from getting worse.

Irregular exercise is a big contributor to back pain, and the "weekend warriors," those who are sedentary during the week and push hard on the weekends, are the face of this contributor to pain.

"If you take on something tough after being relatively sedentary, you can seriously hurt yourself," explains Arya Nick Shamie, M.D., a spokesperson for the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons and an associate professor of spine surgery at the University of California - Los Angeles. And it's not just the risk of injury while you're doing the activity you have to worry about. "If you are doing high-impact sports without cross-training first to strengthen your core, your spine won't have strong enough muscles to support the impact," says Robert S. Bray, M.D., the founding director of DISC ([discmdgroup.com](#)) and a neurological spine surgeon.

He recommends dedicating as little as 15 minutes three times a week to basic core exercises and stretching to help prepare your core for more intense workouts later in the week.

Kids who are heavy can exert a lot of force on your spine, says Shamie, not to mention they're often struggling and squirming, causing you to twist and bend. There's not an ideal position to keep them in, though some are worse than others -- "having a person directly on your spine is one of the worst things you can do," says Bray -- so maybe avoid those piggy back rides. When you're lifting your child up (or any object, really), focus on keeping your shoulders over your pelvis as you bend your knees, and try not to move too far forward while you grab on. This will help flex your lower back, explains Shamie.

Slouching is, of course, not great for your back. If you sit for a long period of time without proper lumbar support it puts a lot of stress on your discs, says Shamie.

"But the most pressure on your discs comes if you're seated and lean over to pick something up, and it's particularly hard on the lower back," he says.

So if you drop something when you're sitting in your desk chair, stand up to get it!

"Smoking is horrible for your discs," says Bray. "Discs deteriorate very rapidly in smokers, and if for some reason you have to do a fusion, it's almost impossible to perform on someone who smokes."

No, not the dance (although that can contribute, if you're really all about the Twist n' Shout). Any activity that involved repeated rotation of your upper torso against your waist will cause micro trauma to your lower back. What we know is, over the years, that can put your low back at higher risk of having damage later in life," says Shamie. "It's cumulative."

"There are several causes of back pain that don't show up on an MR scan and are very serious," says Bray.

He says the most common are spinal cord tumors, tethered cord syndrome (where the tail that connects your pelvis to your spine -- which usually thins, stretches out or breaks as we age -- remains attached and causes pain), Team disease (a condition where the blood vessels from the front of the chest wrap around the spine and drain into the muscles, causing compression) and Arnold Chiari syndrome (a syndrome where the bottom of the cerebellum hangs too low and pushes on the top of the spinal cord).

"90 to 95 percent of back pain cases aren't these types of situations, but if you have pain and the answer isn't in an MRI scan, visit a well-trained neurosurgeon who can evaluate and look for these types of conditions," says Bray. Your spinal discs don't have blood vessels bringing them nutrients, says Shamie -- they are nourished by water, which depletes during the day. "You should try and get at least seven hours of sleep every night, because overnight is when your discs hydrate again," he says.

A mattress that sags or dips in the center will bend the spine abnormally, says Bray. "We used to think that a very hard mattress was better, but now we know what works best is to sleep on a soft-top mattress with firm coils underneath," he explains. It also helps to adjust your pillow based on the way you sleep -- a thicker pillow for side sleepers and a thinner one for back sleepers -- to reduce neck pain.

Link:

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