

REMEDIES

# How to beat a bad back

Got lots of back pain? These easy everyday fixes will make it go away.

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN



**Lesson learned:** A serious back injury taught writer Leslie Goldman to take better care of her body.

I was wearing just a bra and jeans, laughing with my husband, when it happened. Dan was doing his dead-on impression of how I look when I check myself out in the mirror, and I was in can't-catch-my-breath hysterics. I stood up straight to defend myself ... and suddenly my upper back and neck seized up with a force so violent I could barely move. I fell on the bed, writhing in pain.

Nine months later, my life is still in slow motion—no easy feat for a type A workout junkie. The luxury of throwing on my Nikes for a run along Lake Michigan is gone. I've quit hustling through airports in high heels, laptop bag slung over my shoulder. No more endless afternoons slumped over

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my computer at Starbucks, sipping my Grande Caffè Americano. I'm one of the nearly 100 million Americans with serious back pain. But here's the irony: The injury has been a painful blessing, teaching me just how strong I really am and what I need to do to stay that way.

## The truth hurts

For a month following that first bout of agony, I thought hot showers and Vicodin would save me. Then, when my doctor prescribed an MRI, I learned the painful truth: I had multiple bulging disks. Apparently, years of peering down at my laptop, phone crunched between my ear and shoulder, had wrecked my neck. Combined with lifting heavy weights and executing some questionable yoga positions (bad Plow!), my C6 and C7 vertebrae (where the neck and shoulders intersect) finally screamed "Give me a freakin' break!" I was told to check into the hospital for three days of total bed rest.

The diagnosis was devastating. I was banned not just from exercise but from everyday pleasures like holding my newborn niece and spooning my husband in bed (good for the soul, murder on the neck and shoulder). Even hugging standing up could trigger a flare-up.

I soon fell into a mild depression. When my physical therapist placed 2-pound dumbbells in my hands a month postinjury, I snapped, "You're kidding me, right?" Pre-MRI, I'd been curling 15-pounders. Her baby weights were a painful insult. I was furious

## Aching back? What to do first

If your back hurts, here's some good news—9 out of 10 times the pain will go away without medical intervention, says William A. Abdu, MD, medical director of The Spine Center at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. So how do you know when to see a doctor? Follow these guidelines.

### IF YOU HAVE ...

Shoulder, arm, or leg pain, plus an achy back or neck

### DO THIS ...

See your primary care doctor, who can take a history, perform a neurological exam, and prescribe a course of treatment or refer you to a specialist.

### IF YOU HAVE ...

Back or neck pain following a long workweek or intense workout session

### DO THIS ...

Rest, take anti-inflammatories or acetaminophen, and see a physical therapist or chiropractor if symptoms persist.

### IF YOU HAVE ...

A bad accident or a fall

### DO THIS ...

Go to the ER to rule out a fracture or ligament injury.



with myself for not heeding the warning signs, like that constant crick in my neck that forced me to swivel my entire body, owl-like, to parallel park. I'd always keep going, keep working out, keep typing.

## Back to school

Slowly, my range of motion returned and the pain dissipated as I retrained my body to do everything—load the dishwasher, dry my hair, make the bed. (See how to do these things the right way, below.) My days were crammed with rehab, posture checks, and hand-and-arm pain that would scare even the toughest patient, let alone a hypochondriac writer.

But the recovery process opened my eyes. A major life slowdown was precisely what the back doctor ordered. I was overtraining, oversteering, and underappreciating my body's abilities—and limits. So I began walking *everywhere*, because that was all my body could do. Those treks turned into mini-therapy sessions, my mind wandering and decompressing. I turned down some writing gigs to make time for my ever-increasing array of physical therapy exercises, like chin retractions and shoulder blade squeezes. I discovered how splaying myself across a foam roller for 20 minutes at a time allowed

me the chance to reconnect with long-distance friends via speakerphone.

## Life 2.0

As part of my recovery, I have completely revamped my workstation—going from eight-hour coffee shop writing marathons to an ergonomic home office, complete with neck-and-back-friendly chair, computer, and phone setups. My empathy for fellow back-pain sufferers has grown exponentially. And a spin through the cold, clanking MRI machine opened my eyes to the fear my mother, relatively newly diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, must have felt when she was first scanned. Suddenly, my bulging disks seemed rather tame.

My prognosis isn't perfect. A repeat MRI revealed a slight increase in the disk bulge, which knocked me back emotionally. But, thankfully, there's no surgery on the horizon. I'm working my way back up to 30 seconds in Plank position, and I'm actually getting more compliments than ever on my toned shoulders, thanks to endless reps with my baby 5-pound 'bells. More important, I've learned that I'm capable of healing myself. It took a smackdown bed rest stint and a slow-but-steady rebuild to teach me that there is more to life than working and playing as hard as possible. ●

## The cure for Blackberry Thumb (and other tech aches)

Technological advances can be a (literal) pain in the neck, thumb, and back, says American Physical Therapy Association spokeswoman Patrice Winter, a Fairfax, Virginia-based physical therapist. Here, the most common modern maladies and how to get relief.

### Blackberry Thumb

Writing e-mails with your thumbs can lead to numbness, pain, or fatigue.

**Rx:** A few times throughout the day, open your hands as wide as possible, spreading all the fingers, and then close them into fists.



### Laptop Back

Looking down toward a laptop screen places your head in a forward position, putting pressure on the upper cervical spine (where the neck hooks into the skull) and lower cervical spine (where the shoulders meet the neck). You'll feel tension and pain in the upper back, neck, and shoulders.

**Rx:** Every 20 minutes, get up and move around. When seated, keep legs uncrossed with some weight on your feet (as if they form a tripod with the chair). Crossing your legs creates an unbalanced, narrow base of support, requiring the torso to work harder to stay balanced.



### Shoulder-Phone Crunch

Holding a cell phone (or any phone) between your neck and shoulder can hurt your nerves, ligaments, and muscles, setting you up for a bulging disk. This could start by feeling like a stiff neck, and lead to pain radiating down the arms.

**Rx:** Use the speaker option or a headset.



## All the right moves



### How to dry your hair:

Don't whip your head upside-down to towel-turban; that's like giving yourself mini-whiplash. Sit on the toilet or tub for a better base of support, with feet on the floor. Then dry or style.

▼ **How to make the bed:** Tackle the farthest corner first, crawling on hands and knees and engaging your core muscles. Ease back to fit other corners. For changing pillow-cases: Place pillow under one arm, gather the case together, and fit it over the end, shaking the pillow in. (Don't pin the pillow to your chest with your chin. That puts the cervical spine in a hyperflexed—i.e., bad—position.)



### How to load a dishwasher:

Point your nose and toes in the same direction so you're not twisting at the waist, which stresses the lower back. Bend your knees and load heavy pieces on top to ease back strain.