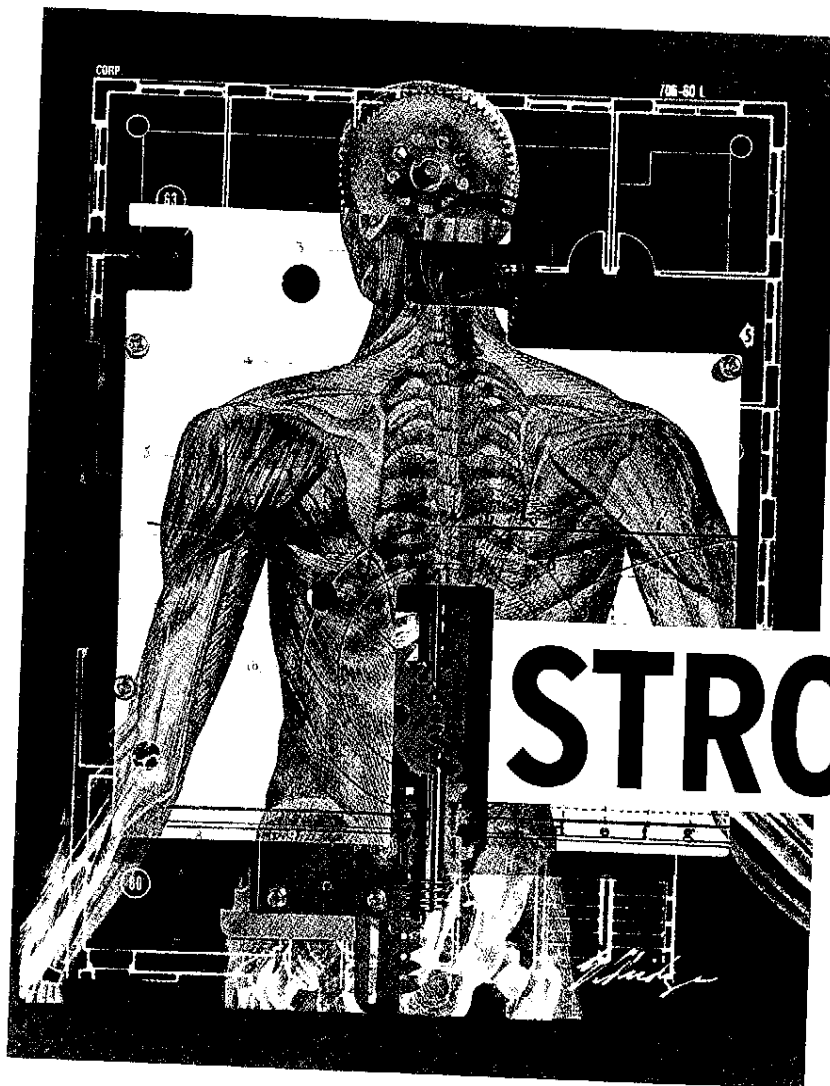


health



Build a **STRONGER BACK**

For a healthy spine that won't give out, it all comes down to staying active

By Alison Palkhivala

Dee Gibney knew that she was in trouble the day she collapsed after getting up from a chair. Her right leg gave out; it simply lacked the strength to hold her up. She'd been experiencing pain and loss of flexibility in her leg for some time but had attributed it to her stressful production job.

Gibney's doctor diagnosed her with degenerative disc disease and recommended physiotherapy. Her physiotherapist used ultrasound to apply heat deep within the tissues of her back and recommended exercises and stretches. This

was back in 1989, when Gibney was in her late 30s.

An ageless dilemma

While the back generally does degenerate over time, the good news is that advancing age doesn't inevitably bring about chronic back pain.

"A lot of people associate getting older with having back pain, which is partially true, but back pain is pretty common at all ages," says Brian J. Gleberzon, a Toronto chiropractor who teaches at the Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College and works at

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"Getting older does not invariably mean having low back pain."

the Bedford Park Chiropractic Clinic. "Getting older does not invariably mean having low back pain."

A functional or structural problem in any component of the back can lead to symptoms of pain, tingling, numbness, or weakness. Malfunctions include vertebral joints failing to move properly in relation to one another, overstretched ligaments, and overexerted muscles. Structural problems of the spine include disc herniation, when the disc ruptures and allows its jelly-like inner core to pop out, and disc degeneration, when the disc begins to wear out, leading to structural changes in the back. A disc can also bulge to one side.

The back is designed for regular movement and doesn't do well without it.

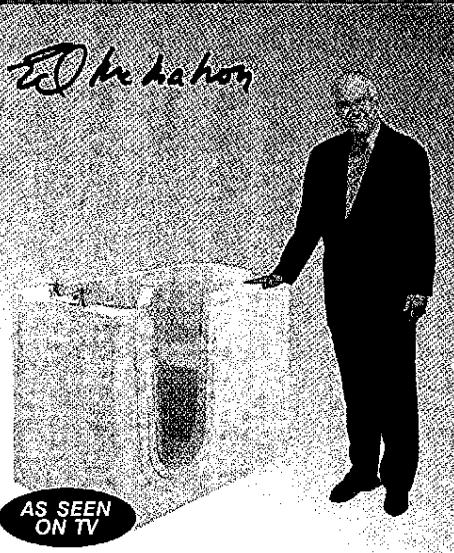
Any of these problems can cause symptoms if they affect the nerves, muscles, or other sensitive tissues surrounding the vertebrae. And these symptoms don't necessarily occur in the back itself. Sciatica, for instance, refers to pain, tingling, or numbness occurring down one or both legs, and it usually has its root cause in the back, where the nerves of the leg originate. Where the symptoms occur depends on which nerve in the back is affected.

Move it or lose it

When it comes to the back, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and experts agree that keeping active is key to maintaining a healthy back. According to Gleberzon, a sedentary lifestyle is a major risk factor for developing back pain. Not only does it lead to weaker muscles, and there-



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fore less natural support for your back, it also contributes to excessive weight gain, which contributes to back strain.

The back is designed for regular movement and doesn't function well without it. Catherine Trask, a PhD candidate in the School of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene at the University of British Columbia (UBC), explains: "Discs [in the back] don't actually have any blood going through them. So, they get nutrients to heal and to grow when your body movements squish and pump the fluid [inside the disc] around. Instead of blood, [this fluid] is doing the job of picking up waste materials and delivering nutrients."

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Before setting out on a regime of stretches and exercise, consult an expert.

Trask is study coordinator for the UBC Back Study, a large field study looking into risk factors for back injury among workers in heavy industry.

Get going!

Nearly 20 years after Dee Gibney's initial diagnosis, she still gets the occasional twinge from her back, especially if she's tired or carrying a shoulder bag for a long period of time, but she doesn't let it slow her down. Activity is what keeps Gibney going strong.

Her workout classes include ball boot camp, Thai kick-boxing, salsa cardio, and capoeira (a Brazilian form of martial arts), all of which she attends at a Toronto gym. Now 50-something, she often puts her classmates—many 30-odd years her junior—to shame. She works out an average

of three to five days per week, stretching not only before and after every workout, but also every morning and evening, without fail.

To feel good, she says, "You certainly have to stay active. I had major surgery [a few years ago],

Motivating yourself to stay active can be a challenge.

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"There's no secret. You just have to do it. It's as simple as that."

and they told me I would be back to working out within six to eight weeks. Well, it was really a year before I felt that I could do so, and I felt horrible. I really know the difference when I'm working out and when I'm not. I gained a tremendous amount of weight that year, and I was hardly eating."

While it's clear that maintaining a high level of activity is crucial to back health, motivating yourself to stay active can be a challenge.

"There's no secret, no tricks. You just have to do it. It's as simple as that," says Gibney.

And she should know. She works out regularly despite arthritis in her knees and regular migraines that make her keenly

sensitive to the noise in her gym. But she's still there, working out.

Add muscle to your core

For those without Gibney's iron will, Gleberzon has some suggestions: choose an activity that you enjoy, set realistic goals, and go with a buddy or a group to make it a social activity. Exercise really doesn't have to be expensive. Walking, either outdoors or in a mall, is an excellent way to stay in shape.

Gleberzon does recommend that you enlist the aid of an expert if you decide to embark on a regular routine of stretches and strengthening exercises. A trainer or physiotherapist can develop an

Unlearn some of the conventional wisdom about back health

Three things that were once believed to be back-friendly—rest, back supports, and slow muscle stretches before a workout—may not be so friendly after all.

"For a long time, people thought that bedrest was the best thing for a sore back," says Trask. "But if you're very, very still for a long period of time, it can actually dry the discs out; the fluid inside them gets stagnated. And if you're just resting the muscles, they tend over time to get weaker. Even doing light, slow, gentle movements can keep the fluid moving around and maintain range of motion in all the joints that might otherwise stiffen."

Trask recommends staying active during back pain, though not necessarily by doing strenuous exercise. Instead, she suggests lighter physical activity, such as walking, which is very healthy for the joints.

As for back supports, the research results have been mixed.

Trask says that if you're relying on an external support to keep your back aligned, then during the time when you're not exercising your trunk muscles, rather than getting stronger, they might actually be getting weaker. Consequently, the trouble comes when you take the back belt off.

In other words, you may be used to lifting things, but your back isn't. When you remove your back support after a long day of moving boxes at the warehouse, you might injure your back simply by lifting a baby.

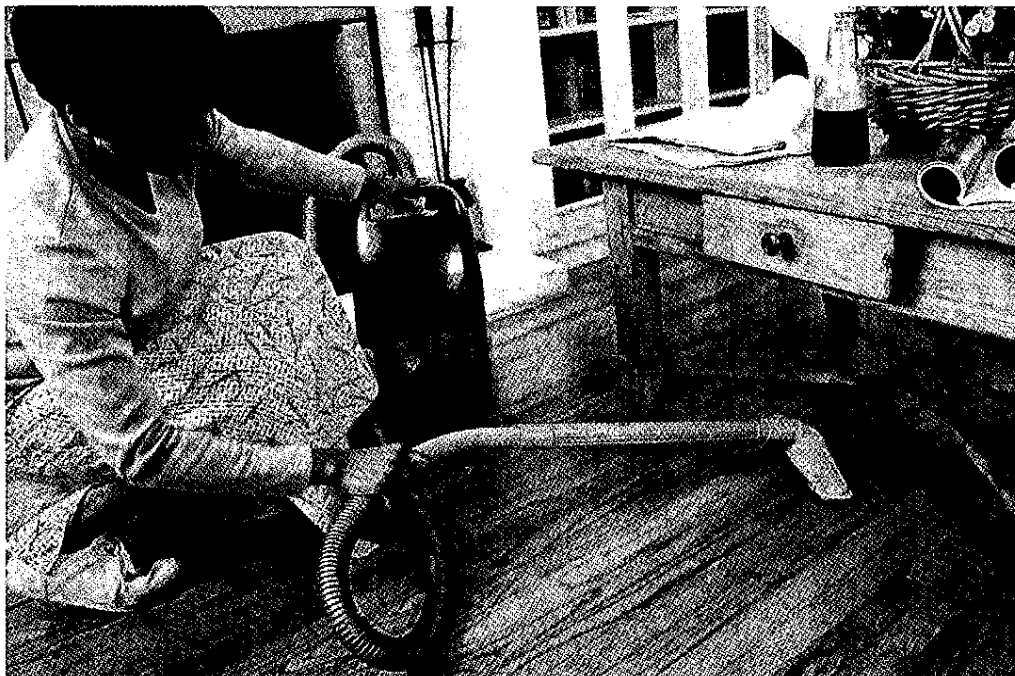
For many people, a typical pre-exercise workout involves long, slow muscle stretches, but this activity may be sending your muscles precisely the wrong message, says Trask.

"You're not activating the muscles. You're actually telling them to relax and get longer, and if you then go in and do something that requires your muscles to be dynamic and contract and actually do some work of lifting, it can actually be confusing for them," she says.

Instead, she suggests a warm-up routine that involves slowly increasing your activity level and flexing the joints through their range of motion.

"One of the reasons we call it a warm-up," she says, "is your body actually does increase its temperature a little bit, so it's something that you want to ramp up slowly."

Arm circles and brisk walking, starting slow and speeding up over a 10-minute period, are good warm-up activities, she says.



Always bend your knees instead of bending over.

appropriate program for you and teach you how to do the moves properly.

Any exercise program, says Gleberzon, should address four key components: strength, flexibility, endurance, and balance. Also, for regular exercise to be beneficial, it must be combined with good nutrition and proper hydration.

When exercising for a healthy back, says Trask, strengthening the core muscles, or those muscles that support the trunk of the body, is particularly crucial.

“Keeping them strong is going to keep all the [vertebrae and discs in your back] lined up with each other and keep them from squishing around too much,” she says.

Other back-healthy habits include maintaining good posture, avoiding having to twist your back, and using proper lifting habits. Twisting while lifting something heavy is asking for trouble, says Gleberzon. Instead, bend at the knees so you’re using the strength of your legs to lift. When vacuuming, sweeping, rak-

ing leaves, or doing activities that require a similar motion, move with your feet and keep your body straight.

Proper sleep habits are also important, says Gleberzon.

“There are some things you can save money on, but a mattress

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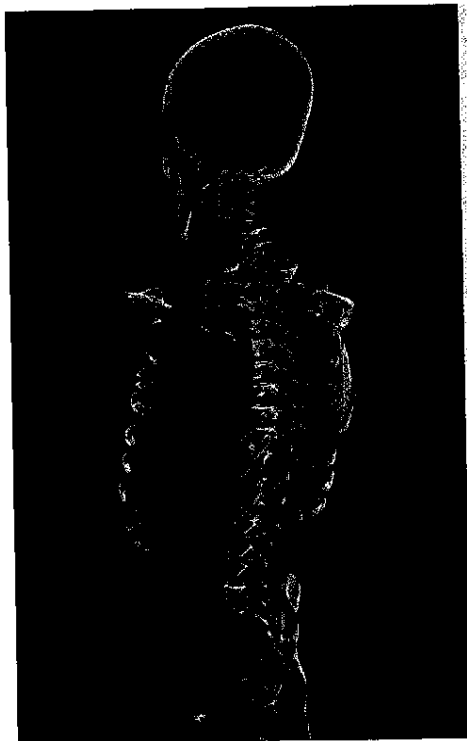


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Back to basics

The back consists of a series of interconnected bones called vertebrae that are designed to keep the body upright as well as to protect the spinal cord, which is a collection of nerve fibres that run down the length of the back.

"Think of the vertebrae as a stack of tuna cans," says Trask. These cans fit together and get smaller and smaller towards the top of the stack. Between these cans are discs, which Trask likens to jelly doughnuts. They have a fibrous shell that encapsulates a gooey, jelly-like fluid. These shock-absorbing discs are what allow the back to flex and the body to bend. Flexible bands called ligaments hold the vertebrae together, and the muscles of the back and trunk flex and relax to produce body movement.

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isn't one of them," he says. Pick a mattress that feels comfortable, and flip it every couple of months. Replace your mattress every 10 to 15 years. Sleep on your side or back rather than on your stomach, which twists your spine.

At work, or anywhere else you spend a lot of time, Trask recommends ensuring your environment is designed ergonomically. That means, for instance, that the telephone should not be placed anywhere you have to twist to reach it. And counters should be high enough that you don't need to bend over to work at them. If you must sit for long periods of time, stand up and move about at regular intervals. If your job requires strenuous activity, like lifting boxes, warm up for ten minutes or so beforehand, just as you would before a workout.

Therapeutic alternatives

But what if, despite all your best efforts, you start to feel the dreaded twinge of back pain? There are several

available treatments. Choosing the right one depends on the root problem.

Medications such as anti-inflammatories, muscle relaxants, and pain relievers can help ease the symptoms. You may choose to consult an osteopath, physiotherapist, or chiropractor. Ultrasound delivers heat deep into the tissues to facilitate stretching of tight muscles. Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation may relieve chronic back pain, and acupuncture has also shown some promise for pain relief. Massage stretches sore, tense muscles, and traction can help pull apart vertebrae that are squished together and pinching nerves. Surgery is generally reserved as a last resort, or for serious injuries, like a fracture. ■



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