

# Health ZONE

Edited by SIMONE CAVE



The women who have decided to shun the conventional GP's surgery

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Give your lifestyle a lasting makeover in just four weeks

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# Watching your back

It starts with the odd twinge but leads to crippling agony.

Back pain is the number one cause of disability in the UK. It will strike one in five of us. It can mean losing your job and giving up your sex life. And everyone is at risk. We expose the truth about the condition that's paralysing the nation

Picture: TONY STONE

**J**UST about everyone reading this will be familiar with tight aching shoulders, the occasional stiff neck or the odd twinge in their lower back.

But chances are you barely give these a second thought, especially if you're young, fit and healthy.

And when you hear other people complaining about their back problems, you're probably sympathetic but not in the least bit concerned

that it could happen to you. Well, not yet in any case.

But back problems can happen to anyone at any time. Just ask around and you'll find hoards of secret bad-back sufferers, each with a tale to tell about their aches and pains and the phone number of the specialist who finally helped them.

It makes no difference how old you are or how much, or little, you work out - the twinges you ignore are signs that something is wrong and your back could give.

One common reason is a slow

**By HEATHER BERESFORD**

build-up of damage to a disc. This can be caused by a combination of poor posture and a lack of exercise and if nothing is done about it, one day the disc will rupture and your back will go.

Another common cause for severe back pain is muscle spasm.

If either of the above happens to you, you'll join the five million people who went to their GP with back problems last year. If you're lucky

you'll get away with a couple of weeks off work, a fair bit of pain and a few months of physio.

But there's also a chance that your life will grind to a halt.

You'll trail round seeing specialist after specialist, you'll be forced to supplement your diet with handfuls of constipating pain-killers and you may have to give up sex, driving and even your job.

The excruciating pain will take over and you'll be able to think of little else. And with back pain now the leading cause of disability in the

UK, it can get even worse than that.

But despite these disturbing revelations, the number of sufferers is rising as a lack of exercise and the widespread use of computers continues to breed generations of back-pain sufferers in the UK.

Most people who experience the odd twinge expect to get better and simply wait for it to go away.

This may work the first few times but persistent discomfort is often there for a reason. Carol

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