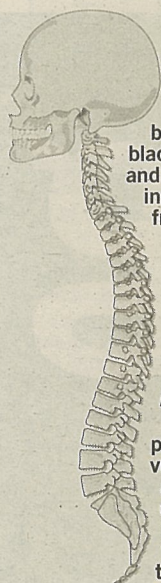


Our lifestyle changes for

Problem areas



Thoracic area

Because of our sedentary lifestyles, the area between our shoulder blades isn't used much and becomes stiff instead of moving freely. To compensate, we move our necks and lower backs far more and these areas are put under strain.

Lower back

This is particularly vulnerable to wear and tear. It bears the entire weight of the upper body and is twisted and bent more than other part of the spine.

Back myths

- **ONCE a bad back, always a bad back.** Not true. Work out what's causing the pain, adopt a back-friendly lifestyle and you'll rarely suffer pain again.
- **TAKE a painkiller and go to bed if your back flares up.** Not true. Bed rest will only make muscle spasm worse – gentle exercise will help you return to normal.
- **"MY back's not getting better – I probably need surgery."** Not true. Only five per cent of back pain sufferers need surgery. Hands-on therapy, exercises to build back and stomach muscles, a reasonable level of fitness and a back-friendly lifestyle will cure most people without the complications of invasive treatments. Just be patient.

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McDairmid, a 32-year-old lawyer, ignored a dull ache in her lower back for weeks until one day she woke up and couldn't move.

Dentist Lisa Scambler, 32, spent every day bent over her patients, oblivious to the fact that poor posture would cause her horrendous pain when she gave birth.

And Jane Rogers, now 30, got so obsessed with exercise she ignored the pain coursing down both legs when she ran. A few years later she was having surgery for a slipped disc and she spent most of her 25th year in bed.

These women have missed work, lost jobs, given up sport and avoided sex. Lisa couldn't even look after her baby.

Women are particularly vulnerable because of periods and pregnancy. The other high-risk group is children because they're still developing bone structure.

Thankfully, with a few simple lifestyle changes you can reduce the chances of being struck down with a bad back. So to avoid the everyday stresses and strains that can build up into a disaster waiting to happen, here's our guide to a twinge-free future.

How to avoid aches and pains for life – your guide to a back-friendly lifestyle...

Exercise

DO 20 minutes exercise three times a week. This will strengthen the diaphragm, pelvic floor, lower back and abdominal muscles. Try walking, cycling, pilates, yoga and swimming. When doing the latter, avoid breaststroke as it can arch the spine.

Back exercises will strengthen and mobilise the spine. Leaflets on lower-back exercises are available from the organisations detailed in the contacts box below. If you experience any pain during the exercises stop immediately and ask a specialist for advice. Never, attempt to "work through the pain" with a bad back.

Posture

THE spine is strongest and safest when it's in an S-shape with a gentle, natural curve in the small of the back and behind the neck. So maintain this position as much as you can whether sitting or standing.

Think about standing up tall, lifting your chest and looking straight ahead – don't poke your chin out, tuck it in. To help find this position naturally, imagine a piece of string lifting you from the top of your head.

Make sure you avoid sitting with your legs crossed as this twists the pelvis, and opt for supportive chairs rather than sofas.

Lifting

BEND your knees when you pick things up and straighten your legs as you stand up, look-

ing straight ahead so your leg muscles are taking the strain, not your back. Never bend over and pick things up with your legs straight.

Also make sure you hug a load close to you, whether you're holding your baby or a heavy bag, as this reduces pressure on the spine.

Working at computers

STOP every 20 minutes, even just to go to the loo or have a coffee. This works different muscles and pumps oxygen round the body to get it flowing into critical nerves. If you absolutely can't leave your desk, try stretching and moving in your seat.

Posture is important, too, so make sure you're sitting in an ergonomic position with your back supported and the computer screen in line with your eyes. Adjust the chair height so forearms and thighs

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'BACK SURGERY ALMOST RUINED MY CAREER'

JANE ROGERS, 31, journalist from Bayswater, London

I MISSED out on a lot of my 20s with back problems and I remember at one stage being off work, in pain and depressed, for so long that I genuinely didn't want to live anymore.

I was born with scoliosis – a twisted spine – but specialists told my parents I'd be fine. Then a series of tragi-comic accidents in my teens messed up things. I was injured by a bolting horse, crashed a car swerving to avoid a rabbit and a huge rugby player crushed my back on a bouncy castle.

I took up running at university but referred pain in my legs forced me to give up. Cycling, badminton and swimming weren't any easier and by the time I left at 22 I'd given up exercise, which broke my heart as I was so sporty.

By 25, the pain was affecting my whole life and I'd tried everything – GPs, physiotherapy, rehabilitation, epidurals (injections into the spine), osteopathy, acupuncture and healing.

An MRI scan revealed I had a prolapsed (slipped) disc and eventually I tried surgery. It was the worst thing I ever did but I was desperate. I was virtually bed-bound for a year afterwards with constant pain, headaches, severe dizziness, sore skin and nausea. I've never known despair like it.

I was also scared that sex would make the symptoms worse yet specialists

seemed too embarrassed to offer advice, so I avoided relationships altogether for a few years. If only they'd advise patients how to get round this, it would save a lot of heartache.

Money problems were horrendous, too. Benefits barely covered my rent and my medical insurance company refused to pay for treatment.

The final straw came when I had to leave a job I loved in public relations and sign on for incapacity benefit again. I stumbled home in tears thinking I'd never get better.

Finally, I found a sports and spinal injury clinic in London. With a combination of hands-on treatment, acupuncture and rehabilitation, they reduced the pain overnight – literally. Their pilates classes help me build up back muscles and improve my core stability.

I now lead a virtually normal life and take regular breaks if I've got a long day in front of the computer.

There was no miracle cure in the end – just finding the right people, strengthening exercises and a back-friendly lifestyle.

● JANE was treated by Sports And Spinal Injury Clinics in London. Ring 020 7371 7666.

What's a slipped disc?

THE discs act as shock-absorbers between the vertebrae and are made up of a soft jelly-like substance held inside a tough, elastic and fibrous outer casing.

When we say "slipped" or "prolapsed" disc, it means the disc hasn't actually moved but has been damaged and the outer casing is split. This allows the jelly to escape and harden which puts pressure on the nerve causing immense pain. This affects the entire back which can go into spasm.

The preferred treatment was once surgery which cuts away the leaked, hardened jelly. But there can be complications such as muscle damage.

Doctors now realise it's not always necessary to remove this jelly. Instead, hands-on treatment and rehab can help free the tension around the damaged disc, rebuilding flexibility and strength.

Another treatment is an epidural which injects steroids into the spine to reduce pain and inflammation.



SLIP UP: Jane's scan with small defect at the lumbo sacral junction disc



POSTURES NEW: Jane's put through her paces by physiotherapist Mark Bender

Picture: HELEN ATKINSON