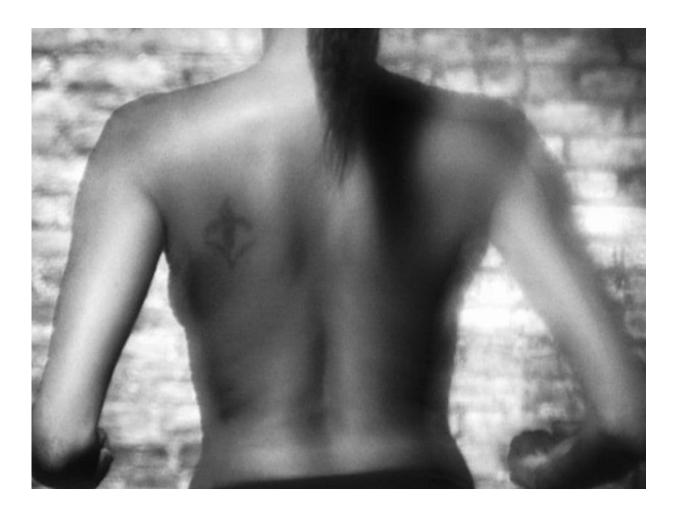# An expert's guide to avoiding back pain

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(HealthDay)—Back pain is a common problem in the United States, but there are ways to protect yourself, an expert says.

"The back is a complex structure with many delicate parts, but with good judgment and healthy lifestyle habits—including proper lifting, good posture and exercise—it's possible to avoid common back pain caused by strained muscles," said Dr. Lawrence Lenke. He is director of spinal deformity surgery at the Spine Hospital at New York-Presbyterian in New York City.

For more complicated spinal problems such as scoliosis, stenosis, fractures or injuries, medical intervention is usually necessary, Lenke said.

"But each person with or without spinal problems can benefit from adopting healthier lifestyle habits to keep your spine as strong as possible," he said.

Lenke offered this advice:

- Maintain a healthy weight, don't smoke, do stretching and strengthening exercises that increase back and abdomen flexibility, and get regular cardiovascular exercise. If your job involves a lot of sitting, get up and walk around every 15 to 30 minutes.
- Maintain good posture even while sitting. Don't slouch or hold your head too far forward. Be sure your feet are supported, hips are level with or slightly above the knees and your spine is slightly reclined. There should be a small arch in the lower back.
- When sitting at a computer, your shoulders should be relaxed and away from the ears. Your elbows should be at the sides, bent to about 90 degrees, and your wrists should be neutral—not bent up, down or away from each other. Your head should face ahead without being too far forward.
- When using a mobile device for non-voice activities, hold it up instead of bending your neck to look down. At just 45 degrees,

the work your neck muscles are doing is equal to lifting a 50-pound bag of potatoes.

- When lifting, make sure objects are properly balanced and packed correctly so weight won't shift. Keep the weight close to your body. And take your time. Bend at the hips and knees and use your legs to lift. Maintain proper posture with your back straight and head up.

More information: The U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion has more on preventing back pain.

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