

Watch Your Back

Nine Proven
Strategies to
Reduce Your Neck
and Back Pain
Without Surgery

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Introduction

If Your Back Goes Out More than You Do: My Plan for Pain Relief and Healing

If you are reading this book, I assume that you or someone you love suffers from back problems. You are far from alone. Back pain is one of the most common health complaints in the country, second only to the common cold. I use the term *back pain* in a general sense. When I refer to back pain, I mean the entire length of the spine, which includes the neck. Four out of five Americans will develop back problems in their lifetimes. I am sorry to say that more than half that number experience chronic pain for five years or more. The affliction is global. Affecting an estimated 577 million people, back problems are the leading cause of disability worldwide, while 290 million people are suffering with neck pain.

I know there is little consolation in numbers. Though many are in the same boat as you and others might “feel your pain,” only you are experiencing that pain. You alone must cope with your condition and try to keep the pain from holding you back, from limiting you. You may have forgotten what it feels like to move freely with a flexible and supple spine. A healthy back supports pain-free movement. When your spine is properly aligned, you have the flexibility and mobility needed for functional movement, such as getting out of bed, going up and down stairs, and bending to pick something up. I have written this book to help you manage your pain, quell flare-ups, and avoid episodes in the future.

Watch Your Back examines what contributes to back and neck pain and what is in your power to correct. Because my program goes beyond the

physical, I deal with issues you might never have connected to the back problems you experience. You might have noticed that your back acts up when you are under a lot of stress, but do you know why? Do you know how to reduce the effects of stress on your back? Do you know how to minimize acute back pain without medication? Do you know what foods and vitamins will calm inflamed nerves and muscles? Do you know what a good night's sleep will do to improve your condition? Do you know how to adjust your mindset toward your bad back to free yourself from self-imposed restrictions, which are often unnecessary? You will find the answers to these questions and more in these pages. My goal is to provide you with remedies to save you from surgery, to relieve your pain, and to protect you from relapses once the pain has resolved. In addition, the program is a necessity for rehabilitating the back after spine surgery.

The book is divided into two parts. The first covers everything you need to know about back and neck pain, from triggers to back problems to the anatomy of what can go wrong. I explain the causes of back pain and the forces you might not be aware of that put extra pressure on your spine, including posture, fashion choices, obesity, being sedentary, and bad movement. The section ends with a brief introduction to the anatomy of the spine and the physical roots of back pain.

Part 2 gives you the tools you need to watch your back, and I dedicate a chapter to each of the nine strategies for relief from back pain. I explain the significance of each strategy and give you clear instructions on how to make it a part of the way you live. Posture corrections, breathing, good movement, spinal strengthening and flexibility, nutrition for a healthy back, and getting restorative sleep are the physical components of the program. Positivity and calmness through meditation comprise the psychological and emotional aspects.

I put it all together in two daily programs created for early birds and night owls. One size does not fit all when it comes to energy highs and lows. If you routinely stay up late and have trouble getting out of bed in the morning, the chances of your doing a quick workout when you wake up are slim. If you are full of energy on waking, lag toward the end of the day, and fall into bed early, exercising before dinner would be a challenge. The daily schedules of the two

programs consider when you are likely to have the most energy. Following the right Watch Your Back program for your biorhythm will make it easier for you to incorporate the program into your daily life.

Of course, you can do parts of the program whenever they work for you, your schedule, or your mood. If you have a stressful morning, you might want to meditate during your lunch break to get yourself back on track. If your partner criticizes something you have done, you might need a bit of positive thinking right away. That said, I have found that it is easier to make these practices habitual by following a regular schedule, so that the planning is already done. But life being what it is, the unexpected happens and flexibility is important. The goal is to turn to these strategies when you need them and when it is convenient. That way you will be more likely to rely on them.

The program is designed to increase your awareness of what affects your spine. When you watch your back, you will see how what you think, feel, and do has a direct effect on the health of your spine. Practicing the nine strategies of my program will help you to change the behaviors that promote back and neck pain and to replace those harmful habits with lifestyle choices that will reduce your pain. In the final chapter, I discuss complementary therapies, such as acupuncture, yoga, Pilates, and herbal remedies, you might want to explore to support your efforts to take care of your spine.

If all of this seems daunting, I want to reassure you that watching your back can become second nature, as it has for so many of my patients. I have learned that if a program is too demanding, my patients will not stick to it. Following the full daily routine takes less than fifty minutes a day. The good news is that the time is not consecutive. You do not have to carve out a big chunk of time at once. The workout takes only ten minutes, while the stretches take two or three minutes. Much of what you will be doing, such as posture correction stretches, deep breathing, and positivity practice, takes only two or three minutes a shot and can be done anywhere. Though I suggest a schedule, you can do these simple things at any time during the day.

You might want to ease into the program by focusing on one strategy that addresses your immediate needs. If you are under a lot of stress, you might want to start with deep breathing and mindful meditation. If your

neck and shoulders ache from working at a computer all day, see what targeted stretches will do to ease the tension in your muscles and relieve your pain. Maybe your back pain is making it hard for you to get a good night's sleep. Paying attention to your natural biorhythms and changing your bedtime rituals could soon have you sleeping like a baby. You get the idea. Once a single strategy begins working for you, you will want to try another. The nine strategies complement each other, and their effects are cumulative. I do not want you to feel overwhelmed. Changing your life takes commitment. You have to embrace the strategies at your own pace. With consistency, watching your back will become automatic. The positive results of your attention will encourage you to do more.

The Watch Your Back program is incremental. You can expand or intensify what you are doing as your commitment grows. Nothing sustains enthusiasm for the program more than good results. When your aches and pains diminish or vanish completely, you will make the nine strategies a way of life because of their power to help you overcome your back problems. I know this from experience. I have seen how enthusiastic my patients are about the effects of their new routine.

SAY GOODBYE TO PAINKILLERS

Jennifer, an aide at a center for autism in her late twenties, suffered a back injury while working with a 200-pound disabled student who did not know his own strength. She injured her back so severely she needed to have surgery to repair it. Frustrated and depressed, she came to see me after an unsuccessful spinal fusion procedure. Her debilitating pain remained. Unable to do basic daily tasks, she had to rely on her husband to do everything, from taking care of her personal grooming to doing housework. She lay in bed, unable to move. Her weight started to go up, which made her even more miserable.

Before seeing me, she consulted with a series of doctors who prescribed a cocktail of prescription drugs, including Vicodin and

muscle relaxers, which are routine treatment for her condition. In fact, patients with chronic pain account for 70 percent of the opioids prescribed in the United States.

Before long, she developed an opioid dependence. The drugs did not help her. She was functionally worse, barely able to move. When she began to mix drugs with alcohol, she knew she had to stop the runaway train she was on.

She went to her doctor's office with a grocery bag full of medication and a jug-sized bottle of vodka and told him that she was done with both. She then tried to manage her pain on her own without success.

She came to see me at New York Spine Surgery and Rehabilitation Medicine. She had heard that I believe in treating the whole patient. I introduced her to the Watch Your Back program. Seeing that she was significantly overweight, the very first goal was to help her take realistic steps to lose thirty pounds. She was carrying the extra weight around her middle. Her waist measured thirty-six inches, which meant the weight was putting more than forty-one pounds of added force on her spine. To put this in perspective, forty pounds is equivalent to four gallons of paint, a medium size bag of dog food, an SUV tire, or a fifteen-foot canoe. Imagine the spine experiencing that much additional force.

I encouraged her to lose one or two pounds a week to meet her goal in six months to a year. She began to eat a pain-killing, anti-inflammatory diet and her weight began to drop. She became more active, taking short walks and doing yoga. She reached her weight goal by year's end.

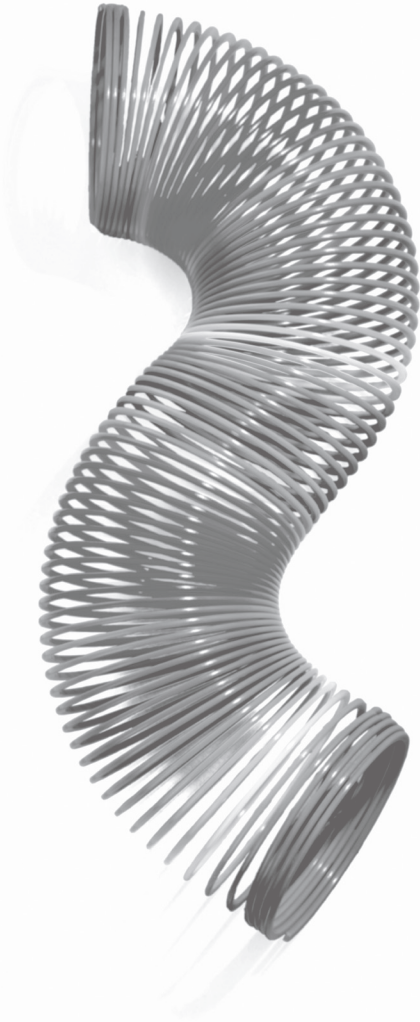
The results were life changing. The improvements she experienced made it easy for her to achieve a positive outlook on life and gave her confidence in her power to manage her pain. Then we were able to adopt some other aspects of the Watch Your Back program: I advised her to be mindful of the right way to bend, lift, twist, and reach at work to diminish the stresses on her spine. We created a program to get her

moving, which involved walking, swimming, and riding a stationary bike.

In time, I was able to adjust her medication so that she could manage her pain without opioids. She was soon back on track without narcotics and able to resume her studies to become a behavior therapist.

Just like Jennifer, my patients have successfully incorporated the program's strategies into their daily lives without too much trouble. From a middle school girl whose heavy backpack strained her spine to a business man whose long international flights and carb-loaded eating while traveling took a toll on his spinal health; from a young mother whose back problems began when she was pregnant and intensified as she lifted and balanced her growing baby on her hip to a postal worker who moved heavy packages all day long, these are just a few examples of patients who have benefited from watching their backs.

I want you to become a success story, too.



Part 1

What You
Need to
Know about
Back and
Neck Pain

Chapter 1

My Aching Back

My patients use so many vivid words to describe their back pain. On the spectrum from mild to severe, they report sensations that are: achy, burning, stabbing, stinging, shooting, throbbing, tingling, sharp, dull, constant, deep, well-defined, vague, annoying, gnawing, debilitating, all-consuming, nauseating, persistent, agonizing, numbing, stiffening, crippling, excruciating. People experience pain in very different ways.

The onset of back pain varies as well. Back pain can come in a flash or develop slowly over time. The pain may come and go or remain constant. Repetitive motions can result in pain that develops slowly and intensifies with time. Disc disease can produce flare-ups now and then, which can become increasingly severe. An injury from lifting something heavy, twisting, or bending the wrong way, or a sudden, jarring movement can cause immediate, acute pain. Sometimes pain develops or worsens hours or days after an accident or injury.

Pain limits people in countless ways. People want to be able to pick up their grandchildren, play a set of tennis, plant a perennial bed, or dance the night away. When pain makes it difficult to do even everyday things, such as tying their shoes, carrying groceries, or throwing a ball for their dog to fetch, the joy can seem to fade from life. The emotional component of pain, especially relentless chronic pain, cannot be underestimated. The sense of restriction can be very demoralizing. It can be difficult to focus on anything else but the pain, which only exacerbates the suffering.

The labels “acute” and “chronic” refer to how pain begins and how long it lasts. Acute back pain is often caused by an identifiable injury. The sudden, severe pain can resolve in a matter of days but may last

up to six weeks. The intensity of a first acute episode can be so intense that people immediately seek medical advice. Over time, my patients learn how to deal with acute attacks as you will in the pages that follow. Instead of a sudden shock of pain that can make you want to lie flat on your back, chronic pain tends to develop gradually over time, but it can become progressively worse. Pain is considered chronic if it lasts at least three months or occurs intermittently over a period of six months. Chronic pain does not always have an identifiable cause.

Being in constant pain without knowing why can destroy the quality of your life. I have witnessed this tragic outcome far too frequently. When pain limits your ability to enjoy the things that give you pleasure, such as driving long distances to visit friends and family, playing soccer in a local league, or even thinking about sitting in a movie seat for a long film, a sense of deprivation can take over, which can lead to frustration and low spirits. The fear of making the pain worse can cause you to further limit your activities, and that will only intensify your distress. I have seen all too often that chronic back pain has a significant emotional effect on my patients.

What I see in my practice has led me to emphasize the psychological effects of back problems and to find ways to treat the mind as well as the body. I want to put you in control of your pain instead of allowing your pain to control you. The Watch Your Back program addresses the emotional and psychological issues that can feed your pain and prevent your healing.

I focus on this emotional component to help patients cope with and reduce their pain, as you will learn in the Watch Your Back program. To help you identify your back pain and deal with it, a closer examination of acute and chronic pain is in order.

ACUTE BACK PAIN

Acute back pain, which comes on suddenly, tends to be severe and short term. An acute episode lasts from a few days to six weeks. Most acute back pain is due to muscle injury, a strain or a sprain in the soft tissues supporting the lower spine or neck. Heavy lifting and repetitive motions can put too

much stress on your back or neck muscles. The muscle fibers are stretched too far, and they tear. When these soft tissues are injured, your body springs into action to repair the damage by generating an inflammation response, the mechanics of which I will cover in detail in chapter 3. Inflammation causes the damaged tissues to swell, which results in pain. The affected muscles can go into spasm or become stiff. The pain can radiate from your spine to your buttocks, thighs, or knees. Sometimes people do not realize that a back injury or problem is the source of pain they feel in their knee. Properly handled, most, if not all, of the pain goes away.

The bad news is that 20 percent of those who experience the agony of acute back pain develop chronic pain with persistent symptoms that last a year. For some, back pain becomes permanent and disabling. Committing to the Watch Your Back program after you calm an acute episode will help you to avoid that fate and escape chronic back pain.

WHEN TO SEE A DOCTOR

The severe pain of an acute episode can be alarming. Many people immediately see a doctor for diagnosis and advice. Though the severity of an acute attack can be worrying, severe pain is not always an indication that something is seriously wrong. Acute back pain usually resolves on its own. After the initial episode, most people learn to wait it out. The fact is that back pain rarely requires urgent medical attention. You need to consult your doctor if:

- A child complains of back pain
- You have progressively worsening pain or weakness in your legs
- The pain is relentless or intensifies
- The pain disturbs your sleep
- You cannot stand upright

- You have a fever
- You are nauseated
- You lose bladder or bowel control

If you should experience any of these symptoms, I recommend that you seek medical advice.

ACUTE ATTACK: AVOID BENDING, LIFTING, TWISTING, AND REACHING

An acute episode of back pain is intense and hard to forget. You may have been laid low by the flash of sharp pain you experience when your back “goes out,” to use a common expression. Some people take to their bed to rest their body. Though moving may be the last thing on your mind, extended bed rest is not the solution. A study found that patients who stopped everything to recuperate experienced more pain and made a slower recovery than patients who simply modified their activities. After a brief rest, remaining active, while careful to avoid physical activity that can trigger or intensify your back pain, will speed your recovery. By gradually increasing your physical limits, you will boost the circulation necessary for healing and release endorphins, your body’s natural painkillers.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR BACK “GOES OUT”

If you feel a flash of pain and think you have thrown out your back, stop what you are doing. Stand up and stand still. Do not try to push through the pain. Find a chair and sit upright to see if the pain subsides or diminishes. Try a few very gentle seated stretches (see pages 145 to 151) to see if you can relax your spasming or stiff back. If a stretch is painful, stop doing it. Lie down on your back, on the floor or your bed.