Back-strengthening and stretching exercises

Dear Alice,

What exercises strengthen your back, particularly your lower back?

Answer

Dear Reader,

The lower back is an area that's commonly ignored in strength training, despite the fact that it can be a painful area for many people. Strengthening exercises, as well as stretching, can help prevent injury and pain in the lower back. It is important to focus on the lower back muscles as well as those in areas that support the lower back. These include the stomach, hip flexors, and hamstrings (back of the thigh).

It is always recommended to seek the advice of a health care provider before beginning any physical activity program, including back-strengthening and stretching exercises. If you have a condition that could be affected by physical activity, it is especially important to speak with your health care provider in advance.

Here are a few lower-back exercises to start with:

Front lying chest lift:

- This is a body weight exercise that involves no equipment at all!
- Lying face down, place your hands (palms down on the floor) next to and even with your chest.
- Keeping your hips and thighs on the floor, lift your chest off the floor. Assisted slightly by your arms as you lift, your lower back muscles should be contracting.
- Make sure the back of your head is in even alignment with your spine and avoid tilting your head up or down.
- Pause briefly when your arms are straight and then return to starting position.
- Build up to three sets of eight to twelve repetitions, taking short breaks between each set.

Double knee to chest stretch:

- Lie on your back with knees bent, and pull both knees off the floor toward your chest, holding your legs behind the knees on the bottom part of your hamstrings.
- This stretch can be done with both legs together or one at a time.
Figure-4 stretch:
- Lying on your back, with your head on the floor or mat and right knee bent, pull your right knee towards your chest.
- Then draw your knee across your body towards your left shoulder. Try to keep both shoulders on the floor or mat.
- Repeat with your left leg.

Cat/Cow stretch:
- On your hands and knees, let your back sag (push your chest towards the floor) while lifting up your head.
- Alternate the stretch by arching your back and keeping your head down.
- Lean back onto your heels and hold, keeping your head down and arms extended.

Abdominal muscle-strengthening stretch:
- Lie face up with your knees bent and your hands placed loosely behind your head.
- Slowly curl your upper back off the floor while pressing your lower back against the floor. You should feel your abdominal muscles contracting.
- Pause briefly before returning to starting position. Try your best not to put pressure on your hands, or pull your head with your hands.
- Keep your breathing coordinated: exhale on the way up, inhale on the way down.
- It is important that you don't rush this exercise.

Hip flexor stretch (a.k.a. Runner's stretch):
- Stretching your hip flexors can help alleviate stress to the lower spine.
- Assume a lunge position, making sure that your front knee is directly over your foot and ankle, and that your knee isn't past your toes when you look down (your knee will be in the form of a right angle).
- With your weight supported by both hands touching the floor, press your hips towards the floor.
- Repeat on the other leg.

Hamstring stretch (straight leg raise):
- This exercise will also help reduce stress to the lower spine.
- Lying on your back, bend your knees and keep both feet flat on the floor.
- Raise and straighten your right leg without lifting your hips from the floor.
- Support your leg and increase your range of motion by placing your hands below your knee, around the back of your leg, and gently drawing your leg towards your chest while keeping it straight.
- Repeat with your left leg.

If you have access to a gym, the lower back machine allows you to increase resistance as you become stronger. Try the following resistance exercises two or three times per week on non-consecutive days:
- Sit on the seat with your legs secured and upper back in contact with the roller pad.
- Push the roller pad down towards the floor, contracting your lower back muscles (Your
range of motion should be comfortable).

- Pause briefly and return to starting position slowly. Keep your arms relaxed and your head in a neutral position.
- Use a weight that allows you to complete two or three sets of eight to twelve repetitions.

You may stretch every day once you've warmed up your muscles. Stretch smoothly, as opposed to bouncing, which can cause injury. For maximum effectiveness, each stretch needs to be held for at least fifteen to thirty seconds. Some examples of lower back stretching exercises include:

You can also choose structured exercises for strengthening your back. Yoga, for instance, is an excellent form of back strengthening physical activity. Many of the suggested stretches listed above are a part of poses and movements performed during a yoga session. Swimming is another excellent exercise for your back, because the buoyancy of the water offers some support.

Also, take notice of your posture. What position do you spend most of your time in when you are sitting, standing, and walking? For example, are you sitting at a desk throughout the day? If so, be aware of your posture. Make sure the ergonomics of your work set up are optimal for your body. If you have freedom to play with your workspace, consider using a balance ball as a desk chair even for part of the day. Sitting on a ball demands your posture to be proper and many of your torso muscles to stay active.

Again, it is important that you speak with a health care provider before you begin a new physical activity regimen. If you are a Columbia student, you can make an appointment with Medical Services (Morningside) or the Student Health Service (CUMC).

Hope these exercises and stretches allow you to attain your physical activity goals!

Alice!

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