

... NOVEMBER 2008 ...

QUICK TAKES



Preventing Back Pain

- Engage regularly in low-impact aerobic activities, such as swimming and walking.
- Build your abdominal and back muscles with core-strengthening exercises, which strengthen and protect your back.
- Increase your flexibility using gentle stretching exercises to allow for better alignment.
- Avoid being overweight, which puts extra pressure on your back.
- Keep a well-aligned posture when sitting and standing.
- Be careful when lifting. Don't lift with your back; lift with your legs; and keep your back straight. Avoid lifting heavy objects or share a heavy load with someone else.

Understanding Back Pain

Back pain is a common reason for trips to the doctor and missed days at work. Here are some facts about back pain, its causes and some treatments.

Common causes of back pain include:

- Strains and sprains
- Herniated discs
- Degenerative disc disease
- Spinal stenosis

Strains and sprains

According to a 2005 report from the National Institutes of Health, "If muscles are poorly conditioned or overworked, they are more easily strained – and this is true of the muscles in your back. Someone who works all week at a desk, for example, can strain their back muscles doing heavy yard work on the weekend." A wide variety of circumstances can lead to a sprain or a strain.

They include:

- Lifting or carrying something too heavy, or lifting incorrectly
- Slouching, slumping and other forms of poor posture
- Lack of strength or flexibility in the back
- Smoking, which causes damage to the spinal discs
- Sleeping on a bed that doesn't provide adequate support

Herniated Discs

A herniated disc, sometimes called a "slipped" or "ruptured" disc, is a common source of back pain. When the center, gel-like part of the disc pushes the outer layer of the disc out into the spinal canal, it puts pressure on the nerves. This pressure causes pain.

A disc can herniate due to a sudden force — like a fall from a ladder. More commonly however, herniated discs are the result of progressive weakening of the discs, often from age or injury. Age and injury can cause discs to flatten out and lose flexibility. The disc may shrink and the outer layer may weaken.

Degenerative Disc Disease

Degenerative disc disease is a natural consequence of getting older. As we age, the discs between the vertebrae become stiff and ligaments can become easily torn. In addition, the soft center of the disc becomes dried out and shrinks. In some cases, arthritis may develop. While just about everyone experiences some disc degeneration through aging, for some it can be particularly painful.

Spinal Stenosis

Spinal stenosis occurs when spaces in the spinal canal narrow and pinch the spinal cord and nerves. This can cause pain in your lower back and your legs. It may also affect the nerves that control leg muscles and sensations. Most often this is the result of aging. As you age, the cushioning discs between the vertebrae may deteriorate, the ligaments connecting bones in the spine may begin to thicken and the joints may start to break down, contributing to spinal stenosis. The condition is most common in people over the age of 50. However, younger people may also develop spinal stenosis through heredity or injury.

Keeping Your Back Healthy

Using proper body mechanics and practicing good posture can help to keep your back healthy. Here are some key tips:

- When you must lift an object, avoid twisting your torso. Lift heavy objects using your legs, not the back. Do not bend at the waist to lift, instead bend your knees and use your leg muscles!
- Do not attempt to lift anything you suspect is too heavy for you and may cause pain. Ask for help.
- Be aware of your posture while sitting and standing.
- Wear flat-soled shoes with less than a one-inch heel.
- If you stand for long periods of time, rest one foot on a small support and place your weight on the other leg, switching weight-bearing legs every 5 to 10 minutes. This will take some of the load off of your lower back.
- If you sit for long periods of time, use a chair with low back support. Keep your knees higher than your hips by occasionally resting them on a stool or other surface.
- Take breaks often to stretch and walk around.

Regular exercise is one of the best ways to prevent back injuries. Exercise not only strengthens the muscles of the back, neck and shoulders, but it relaxes the back, reduces pain and increase flexibility. Exercise can also improve your mood and reduce your risk for depression. The National

Institutes of Health recommend 15 to 30 minutes of back exercises 2 to 3 times a week to prevent back pain.

There are 3 types of exercises for you to consider:

- Range-of-motion exercises
- Strengthening exercises
- Aerobic or endurance exercises

Stretching or range-of-motion exercises help keep your back limber and improve your flexibility. Strengthening exercises involve weights or exercise bands that help to strengthen your muscles and the joints within the back. Aerobic exercise, such as brisk walking, gets your heart pumping, increases lung capacity and keeps your joints moving. Look for activities you'll enjoy. Swimming, taking an easy yoga or Pilates class or just walking a dog can be a great start.*

Carrying extra weight, especially around your waistline, taxes the low back muscles. If you feel like your weight may be contributing to your back pain, take steps to do something about it. Start to make small changes in your diet to reduce calories and incorporate healthier foods. Remember to eat a variety of foods to make sure you are getting all of the vitamins and nutrients your body needs. No one food contains them all, so the ideal meal plan is a carefully balanced and varied one.

*Note: Talk to your doctor before starting any new exercise plan

Harvest Vegetable Medley

Makes: 8 Servings | Takes 20 Min.

Use this recipe as a guide for a mix of any of your favorite vegetables. Try substituting green beans for the peas or add a few boiled baby onions for interest.

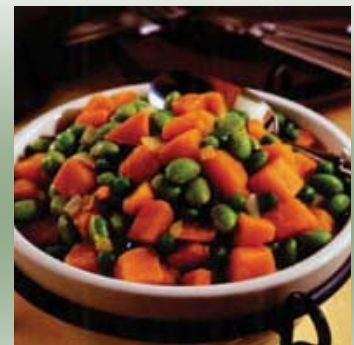
Ingredients

No-stick cooking spray
1 large sweet potato, peeled and diced
1 small onion, chopped
1 16-oz. bag frozen shelled edamame or baby lima beans
1 16-oz. bag frozen baby peas
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley or mint

Preparation

1. Spray a large sauté pan with cooking spray and set over medium heat. Add diced sweet potato and 1/2 cup water. Cook until the water has evaporated and the sweet potato is tender. Add onion and cook, until softened, about 2 minutes. Remove from heat.
2. Bring a large saucepan of water to a boil. Add edamame or lima beans and cook until barely tender, about 4 minutes. Add peas and cook 1 minute longer. Drain.
3. Add drained vegetables to sweet potato/onion mixture. Warm over medium heat until all vegetables are heated through. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Sprinkle with fresh herbs and serve.

(Photo Source: © Cole Riggs/Alere)



Nutritional Info/Serving: 125 Calories, 3.2g Fat, 0.4g Saturated fat, 0g Trans Fat, 8.0g Protein , 17g Carbohydrate, 4.9g Fiber, 44mg Sodium