

Supplemental Health Care SM



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BACK SAFETY AND CARE FOR NURSES AND HEALTHCARE WORKERS

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Welcome to Supplemental Health Care, and tha...

Choosing a career as a healthcare professional requires strength, both mentally and physical. Nurses and other healthcare workers put in long hours and are often required to help lift and support patients on a regular basis. As a result, clinicians often put their backs at risk.



The National Institutes of Health have reported that low back pain is one of the most common ailments among healthcare professionals (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519066/>), putting them at even greater risk than those who work in heavy industries (<https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/economics/heavy-industry/>). While low back pain may be short-lived or come and go, it can also be severe, chronic, and/or career-ending if left untreated.

As the United States faces a critical healthcare staffing shortage, preserving the health of nurses and healthcare workers is essential. This article will examine the reasons and risks for back issues in healthcare, why prevention is important, and tips on back strengthening techniques.

Risks for Back Injuries as a Healthcare Provider

While the reasons may seem obvious, there are multiple conditions and circumstances that might cause you, as a nurse or healthcare professional, to suffer a back injury.

Three primary reasons for back injuries are (<https://spineina.com/blog/back-pain-in-nurses/>):

- **Long working hours:** It isn't the hours that are necessarily a cause for back pain (though that's another issue in and of itself), it's what you're doing for those long hours that plays a role in your pain. Nurses and other healthcare professionals are often required to hold awkward positions for extended periods of time, such as during a surgical procedure or while bending over to assist a patient, and this positioning often causes strain on the back.
- **Heavy lifting:** Heavy lifting includes transferring and repositioning patients, which is one kind of heavy lifting a healthcare professional may perform. You might also be pushing or pulling patients in stretchers and wheelchairs as you move around a hospital. Additionally, you might also be required to move equipment or supplies.
- **Demanding schedules:** A long, demanding schedule often causes fatigue, which leads to poor posture, both sitting and standing. Poor posture exaggerates the curvature of the lumbar spine, which can lead to pain. Additionally, you might spend many hours using vibrating or impact-heavy tools, which strains your muscles and increases fatigue during an already demanding day.

If you think about a typical workweek for a healthcare clinician, every day or night shift could include long hours, the heavy lifting of patients, and other demanding activities that cause strain on your back and other muscles. While there really isn't much you can do to change the nature of your work, prevention is the best method when it comes to keeping your back safe.

Minimize Risk Through Prevention

Take the time to educate yourself on how to prevent back pain or injury. Maintaining the strength and health of your back is essential for minimizing discomfort and reducing the risk of injury. By practicing proper body mechanics and remaining conscious of your movements, you can significantly reduce the likelihood of experiencing back-related injuries.

But, *what are proper body mechanics?* Proper body mechanics in healthcare (<https://nurse.org/articles/nurse-back-injury-body-mechanics/>) refers to “using specific techniques and muscles to carry out high-risk tasks without causing strain or injury to the body.” How many times have you been told to lift with your legs and not your back? Well, that’s just a reminder to use proper body mechanics.

Here’s a list of things to remember when you’re required to lift a patient or something heavy on the job:

- Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart. Give yourself a good base for support.
- Get as close to the patient as you can.
- Face the patient when you are lifting.
- Don’t bend or twist at the waist.
- Bend with your knees, not your back or waist.
- Lift with your legs and not your back. You should feel the activation of your muscles in your legs, in other words. If you feel it in your back, stop and try again.
- Use a mechanical lift when available and if possible.
- Ask for help if you need it. Be mindful of your body, and if something starts to hurt, stop! Adjust your position and try again. If it’s still too much, ask for help. It’s always better to ask for help than it is to injure yourself.

Throughout the day, check on your posture. Are you slouching? Is your head jutting forward? Make a quick adjustment and try to sit and stand straight and tall. Good posture protects your back.

How to Strengthen Your Back

Another key component of back injury prevention is strength training. Make sure you are exercising and strengthening your back muscles. It's not a bad idea to get a personal trainer for a while to teach you some good techniques and exercises for back strengthening. There are many things you can do at home to strengthen your back on your own or with a partner.

You can find great lists of back strengthening exercises that you can do at home (<https://www.healthline.com/health/fitness/back-strengthening-muscles-posture#exercises>) with little to no equipment. Choose a few to rotate through each day, and do them while you watch TV or listen to an audiobook. Here are a couple of no-equipment exercises you can try to get started:

- **Dolphin Kicks (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6SwK57L9hU>):** this exercise will help strengthen your legs and abdominals. Strengthening your core is always a good idea when you want to strengthen your back.
- **Superman (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9zXkxUAfUA>):** a recommended exercise from pediatric spine experts, this one will help strengthen your whole body.
- **Hip Hinges (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSDiTDwdOjo>):** also known as the "Good Morning" exercise, this is a great one to do when you wake up and as you go about your daily routine.

And, while you might not be sitting at a desk for the majority of your day, if you do find yourself sitting in an office chair, you can also do some stretches or strengthening exercises while you're seated. (<https://www.orthocarolina.com/media/back-pain-7-stretches-you-can-do-from-your-desk-chair>)

Care for Your Back Now

Your health and well-being as a healthcare provider matter. If you are injured or in pain, not only can you not perform to the best of your ability, but you'll also increase your chances of serious injury. Take care to learn about proper body mechanics, strengthen your back, and watch out for situations where you could be injured.

Here at Supplemental Health Care, we know that your job as a healthcare worker is essential. We hope that this article will give you more ideas on how to support yourself and give your body its best chance at staying healthy and safe on the job.

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