

# CARERS AND BACK PROBLEMS



Most of us are likely to experience lower back pain at some time of our lives. But if you are caring for a family member or friend with a disability or chronic illness, you are more likely to be at risk of injury.

While caring can bring many positive rewards, research has shown that it can also have a negative impact on the carer's physical health. Back injury is one of the common effects of caring.

Caring might include manual handling tasks such as helping the person you care for to get in and out of their bed or onto a wheelchair, helping them to sit on the toilet, with showering and dressing, or with standing and walking.

When these tasks require lifting, carrying, lowering, pushing, pulling, twisting, reaching and repetitive movements, it can lead to musculoskeletal disorders such as sprains and strains, spinal disc problems, tendonitis and osteoarthritis.

You may not be able to avoid manual handling tasks but there are strategies to help you avoid an injury.

*Carers are more likely than is normal to be experiencing chronic pain and highly likely to be carrying an injury.<sup>1</sup>*

## TRAINING

The best way to learn about the safest way to lift and move someone is to have someone show you how. Talk to your GP about your needs and concerns. You may be able to get a referral for an Occupational Therapist (OT) to visit you at home to show you how to lift and/or use any special equipment.

An OT can also advise on special home modifications such as handrails and wheelchair ramps which can make manual handling tasks safer.

There are also a number of resources available including: *Back to Basics: handy hints for carers to help prevent back injuries*. This useful booklet is produced by the Department of Veterans' Affairs and is available for free download from [www.dva.gov.au](http://www.dva.gov.au).

## STAYING FIT

Staying fit and healthy is one of the best ways to prevent back injury. Regular exercise improves resilience, strength and flexibility. It also enhances health and wellbeing by promoting better sleep,

reducing stress and increasing your energy and alertness.

Walking and swimming are easy and safe exercises, but any activity that gets your heart pumping and your body moving can be beneficial. You may enjoy gardening, bushwalking, tai chi or dancing. Yoga and pilates are excellent exercises for strengthening your back.

Try and fit 30 minutes of exercise at least three times a week, and make sure you talk to your doctor before beginning any new exercise program.

### QUICK TIPS:

Here are some tips on better ways to lift to avoid back injury:

- Make use of any equipment that is available (hoists, slide sheets, transfer slings etc).
- Plan the transfer and make sure there that there is adequate light, there are no obstacles in the way, and floors and pathways are even and dry.
- Tell the person you care for what you plan to do and talk about how they can help.
- Tighten your stomach muscles to provide extra support for your spine.
- Always bend your knees and never bend your back. Use your legs to do the work.
- Lift with the person close to your body.
- Maintain your posture and positioning throughout.
- Don't rush. Keep movements slow and steady. Keep breathing.
- If it feels uncomfortable, stop.

Contact the Carer Advisory Line for more information 1800 242 636.

1. Cummins, Robert A (2007) *The Wellbeing of Australians - Carer Health and Wellbeing*. Deakin University, Geelong.

## TREATMENTS FOR BACK INJURY

There are two types of back pain: acute (sudden, but usually of short duration) and chronic (usually develops gradually but can cause long term problems).

It is important that you visit your GP if you experience an injury.

Treatments for acute pain might include paracetamol or anti-inflammatory drugs. If stronger pain relief is needed your GP may prescribe codeine or a muscle-relaxant.

*75% of carers felt that the most effective support was a regular and appropriate break from caring.<sup>2</sup>*

Your GP may also refer you to a physiotherapist, osteopath or chiropractor.

In severe cases, your GP may recommend surgery.

Some people find that hot/cold compresses provide temporary relief from pain. Others swear by therapeutic massage or acupuncture.

At first you may need to rest and refrain from further lifting and reduce any strenuous activity. But in most cases, it is important to keep moving and to stay active. Your GP can advise on an appropriate exercise program for you.

## MANAGING CHRONIC PAIN

Chronic pain that continues for extended periods can be debilitating and distressing.

In such cases, it may be beneficial to implement strategies for managing chronic pain. These may include: relaxation therapies, distraction techniques and hypnotherapy.

## CARING WITH A BACK INJURY

A back injury can make it difficult to care for your family member and will affect your quality of life.

Caring can be difficult at the best of times; it can feel almost impossible if you are experiencing your own health issues.

To help you last the distance, make sure you access all the support that is available to you.

Contact the Carer Advisory Line (1800 242 636) for advice and information about practical, financial and emotional supports that are available to you as a carer.

## WHEN ONLY A BREAK WILL DO

Treating a back injury may take a long time. Sometimes a period of respite may be the only way you can rest

and recuperate. You might consider asking another family member to take over the caring role for a night or a weekend. You might like to consider community respite options such as in-home respite (a careworker comes and takes over care in your home) or facility based respite (where the person you care for has a temporary stay at a respite house or (for an older person) an aged care facility).

Taking a break is important to maintaining your health and wellbeing and building the resilience and capacity to cope with caring.

Contact the Carer Advisory Line on 1800 242 636 for advice and information about supports and services to help you.

### QUICK TIPS:

When you are caring for someone else you often put your own needs last. The following are general tips to enhance your health and wellbeing; helping you to stay strong and better cope with the demands of caring.

- Eat well. A nutritious balanced diet will give you the fuel your body needs to keep on caring. Eat lots of fresh fruit and vegetables and cut down on sugary and fatty snacks.
- Sleep well. Caring can be exhausting so try and get eight hours sleep every night.
- Share the care. Let family members and friends know that their help and support is welcome.
- Talk it over. With a friend or family member or with a
- professional counsellor. Join a Carer Support Group and meet other people to share tips and experiences.
- Take a break. Do something that you love ... or do nothing but relax and recharge your batteries.

Contact the Carer Advisory Line for more information 1800 242 636.

2. Carers Scotland (2011) Sick, tired and caring: the impact of unpaid caring on health and long term conditions. Glasgow

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