10 Quick Remedies You Can Do At Home to Relieve Upper Back Pain

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How to Relieve Upper Back Pain

Technology has its downsides. Unfortunately for us, upper back pain is one of them.

A recent report published in *The Spine Journal* revealed that an increasing number of patients reported of neck and upper back pain associated with smartphone use.

To be clear, it's not the device that is the culprit; instead, it's our poor posture as we look down at our phones for hours on end that causes the discomfort.

As a writer, I also experience bouts of upper back pain due to my bad habit of hunching over my computer. Although not debilitating, the stiffness and pain can seriously ruin my productivity.

For some, upper back pain takes on a more sinister form. When my mother suffered a serious fall, for instance, the muscle injury on her upper back made even the simplest acts of laughing, sneezing, or coughing incredibly tricky.

Upper back pain may be relatively less common than lower back pain, but it doesn't make it less of a concern.

If not properly addressed, it can spread to other muscles of the body – known as "referred pain" – and interfere with your sleep and daily activities.

Fortunately, you don't have to be helpless in the face of upper back pain. Whereas chronic cases require serious medical attention, upper back pain mostly dissipates after a few days or weeks with the help of the following home remedies.

10 Ways to Relieve Upper Back Pain

1. Take a Rest

Resting on a sofa or bed can ease the pain and prevent re-injury.

To reduce the pressure on your back muscles and other surrounding structures, put a pillow under your head and between your knees when lying on your side, under your hips if lying on your stomach, and under your knees when you're lying on your back.

Whatever the position you choose, ensure that you only rest for a few hours at a time. Bed rest, if you overdo it, can be counter-effective.

According to *Harvard Health*, staying in your bed for longer than 1 to 2 days will not only slow down your healing

but can also lead to muscle weakness, stiff joints, constipation, blood clots, and mental problems like depression.

Ideally, resume your normal activities as soon as you can, being careful not to twist or bend too much to prevent pain and resting your back when needed.

2. Use Ice Pack or Heating Pad

Most people blindly choose between hot and cold compress when relieving upper back pain.

Both are effective—but only if given at the right time.

A cold compress reduces swelling and pain in muscles following an injury. It can be in the form of a commercially available ice pack or an improvised one made of packed ice wrapped in a towel.

Apply the cold compress on the painful area for 20 minutes every 2 to 3 hours for the first 72 hours (3 days). Afterwards, you can switch to moist heat or alternate between hot or cold compress.

The heat reduces pain but also increases blood circulation which boosts the healing process. Interestingly, heat therapy is one of the methods recently recommended by the *American College of Physicians* in treating acute to subacute back pain.

3. Get Moving

As with lower back pain, exercise, as long as it's done with doctor's approval, can also ward off the upper back pain.

The thoracic spine holds your upper back together. This delicate structure is supported by muscles and ligaments which are prone to deconditioning.

Through exercise, you can strengthen these supporting structures and in so doing improve your posture and reduce your risk of back injuries.

Once you've determined what activities are safe and suitable for your condition, you can start a regular exercise routine, preferably 15 to 30 minutes a day for at least two to three times a week.

4. Isometric Exercises

These are back strengthening exercises that require you to push against a resistance without actually moving a muscle.

In one example, you place your palm on your forehead and push it forward while keeping your neck steady. The resistance on your neck muscles is what will keep them strong in the long run.

You can repeat the same technique on either side of the head, the muscles of which are directly connected to the upper back. Keep the resistance for 10 seconds before relaxing and do up to 10 repetitions at a time.

5. Aerobic Exercises

The increased blood flow to your body as you do aerobics is beneficial for the spinal disks. They depend on the blood for nourishment, as do the muscles that altogether keep the upper back stable.

A 30-minute exercise on the treadmill or a stationary bike is enough to keep the blood pumping. Just make sure you don't rush it; doing so will increase the likelihood of re-injury.

Next page: Learn five more ways to relieve upper back pain and when to seek medical help.

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6. Upper Back Stretches

Simple warm-up stretches that target upper back muscles can also effectively fend off pain or stiffness. Here are my three favorites:

- **Thoracic extension.** Sit on the edge of a chair. Put both your hands together behind your head. Gently arch backward until you face the ceiling. Do ten repetitions.
- **Shoulder roll.** While in a sitting or standing position, roll your shoulders forward. Do it repeatedly, creating large circles and then slowly progress to smaller circles. Reverse direction and repeat the same movements. Do ten repetitions.
- **Butterfly.** Place your palms on your shoulders and slowly bring your elbows together until you feel a stretch. Hold for 5 seconds before returning to the starting position. Do ten repetitions.

7. Try Yoga

Here's why joining the yoga bandwagon is a good thing: It addresses both the physical and mental aspects of upper back pain.

Aside from the stretching exercises, it also incorporates mindful breathing which releases tension that could easily snowball into a full-blown upper back pain.

In a 2015 study published in the *International Journal of Yoga*, six studies involving a total of 570 patients were examined. The researchers found out that Iyengar yoga, a form of yoga with an emphasis on restoring your healthy posture, are relatively more effective in relieving upper back and neck pain compared to other methods.

The good news is you can try this evidence-based upper back pain relief anytime and anywhere. Simply hop on your mat and follow the poses recommended by one of many yoga tutorials on YouTube.

Candace Moore, an international yoga instructor and author of the book "*Namaslay,"* suggests doing back-friendly poses a few minutes each day to cope with upper back pain. These include, but not limited to, the cat/cow pose, bow pose, seated twist, and child's pose variation.

8. Maintain a Good Posture

Much of our struggle with upper back pain can be blamed to our poor posture.

We hunch, slouch, and slump throughout the day, not realizing that our bad habits can eventually lead to chronic back pain.

Posture doesn't only include the way we sit or stand. It also covers practically every movement that requires our back like bending, reaching, pulling, and lifting.

From my years of working as a nurse, I learned that keeping your center of gravity intact is the best way to lift objects without hurting your back. This is done by holding the object close to your body and bending the knees instead of your back.

To maintain a healthy posture while sitting or standing, pull in your stomach and shoulders to adequately support the back muscles.

Another useful method is with the use of imagery: Picture yourself as a ballerina or figure skater suspended to the air through a string that connects your ears, shoulders, ankles, and feet vertically.

9. Pamper Yourself With a Massage

Thanks to massage, I've finally learned what "sweet aches" really mean.

It's that sensation that occurs when I receive a good back rub right after a hard day's work. The long strokes can be painful at times, but there's no doubt a good massage can give a different high.

Massage also helped my mother recover from a recent upper back injury. This is because massage increases blood circulation to the injured area, resulting in quicker recovery, increased flexibility, and improved sleep.

It's also good for your mental health. Massage boosts your brain endorphins, the feel-good chemical associated with less stress and improved mood, both of which can positively impact your recovery.

Of course, not everyone can get a massage. Talk to your doctor to learn more about contraindications to massage which may include, but not limited to, pregnancy, varicose veins, sunburn, and abrasions.

If you want a massage for your upper back, chances are you'll receive either Swedish or Shiatsu.

The former involves kneading and long, gliding strokes necessary to release muscle tension or stiffness. Shiatsu, meanwhile, is all about "finger pressure" applied directly to muscle knots or highly tense areas in the upper back that form either due to lack of activity or overwork.

Getting a therapist to massage your back is easier said than done. For those whose time and money are limited, buying affordable handheld massagers are probably the best alternatives.

There are also massage cushions that are shaped like chairs and designed to mimic human touch. These devices provide Shiatsu, Swedish, or both massage styles through rotating nodes that travel up and down the sides of your spine.

10. Other Methods to Relieve Upper Back Pain

Provided that you don't have digestive issues that might interfere with their absorption, you can try over-the-counter pain relievers such as acetaminophen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.

Read the instructions carefully and never take beyond the recommended dosage. If side-effects occur, contact your physician immediately.

Preventing and/or managing upper back pain also requires serious lifestyle modifications.

- **Stress can turn your coping mechanism upside down and make your upper back pain worse.** Learn how to keep your mind and emotions under control through different de-stressing techniques like mindfulness meditation or cognitive behavioral therapy.

- **Avoid smoking like a plague.** It releases chemicals into the bloodstream that irritates the nerves and weakens your back muscles, making them more vulnerable to upper back pain. Nicotine from the cigarettes also constricts blood vessels. This limits the blood supply to injured or sore back muscles, slowing down their recovery in the process.
- **Maintain a healthy weight by watching what you eat.** Every extra pound you gain is an added burden to your upper back muscles. A diet rich in calcium and Vitamin D can also go a long way in preventing fractures and osteoporosis, both of which contribute to upper back discomfort.

When to Seek Medical Help

Most cases of upper back pain usually subside within 1 to 2 weeks.

However, if a serious injury causes the pain or if it lingers for more than a month even after trying all the home cures I've suggested above, it's time to see the physician.

Upon evaluation, the doctor can prescribe you with an anti-inflammatory drug, muscle relaxant, or a trigger point injection to break muscle spasms. You may also be referred to specialists like physiotherapist or those who provide complementary medicine treatments like acupuncturist or chiropractor.