




**NEW THINKING**

## Worry less, save your back

Stress and anxiety can result in shallow breathing, which in turn leads to back pain. Here's why: When you're anxious, you tend to take short breaths or hold your breath, so the nerves passing through your spine's 26 joints "freeze up" and cause pain. Taking deep, full breaths opens the lungs, bringing in oxygen and allowing the joints and nerves to move more freely, explains Kenneth Hansraj, MD, author of *Keys to an Amazing Life: Secrets of the Cervical Spine* (Amazon Digital Services, 2012).

**OUTSMART PAIN** Make sure you are breathing fully and deeply, and practice alternate nasal breathing daily. Sit tall in a comfortable position and breathe in fully (your torso should expand on the inhale), then pinch your nostrils together, holding in the breath. Release your right nostril and exhale. Then inhale deeply through your right nostril; pinch it closed. Hold, then release your left nostril and exhale. Repeat, working up to at least 5 minutes a day.

 If your back is aching, go to [weightwatchers.com/backpain](http://weightwatchers.com/backpain) to master moves that can help you feel better.

**NEW THINKING**

## Put your abs to work for you


While it's true that exercising your abdominals makes for a stronger spine (ab muscles, after all, support the back), your efforts will be moot if you target the wrong muscles. Sit-ups work ab muscles that are the farthest from the spine, thus crunches won't stabilize your vertebrae—and may strain them.

**OUTSMART PAIN** Strengthen your transverse abs, the deep muscles that wrap around your midsection like a corset, with exercises like a modified plank: Rest on your knees and forearms, and keep your body in a straight line while balancing for ten seconds at a time.

**NEW THINKING**

## Wait it out

When recovering from back pain, being patient can work in your favor. You should allow yourself at least three months to heal completely. And always try less invasive treatments like physical therapy—very often prescribed to back pain patients—before opting for prescription pain meds or cortisone injections. (Check with your health insurance company to see how many therapy visits are covered.) Physical therapists typically begin with massage, electrical stimulation and ultrasound treatment to help reduce inflammation and break up scar tissue to get stiff joints moving. Then, they prescribe "homework" of stretches and strengthening exercises.

**OUTSMART PAIN** Sticking with physical therapy can be a challenge, but the payoff is worth it. "With conservative treatment—physical therapy and mild pain relievers—back pain usually gets better within three weeks," notes Bruce Landon, MD, an internal medicine physician at Harvard University in Cambridge, MA. So go to physical therapy regularly, avoid taking anything stronger than Tylenol or Advil and maintain as much of your usual activity as possible. 

## CURE OR CROCK?

Everyone knows someone who claims her back pain was "cured" by a chiropractor. But research on chiropractics' long-term results is decidedly mixed. A 2011 Cochrane Review (considered the gold standard of research review) appraised a dozen studies of almost 3,000 patients with lower back pain. The conclusion: Only three of the studies were unbiased; and while there was evidence of a small benefit, it wasn't enough to boost chiropractic care into the mainstream. **Bottom line:** More research is needed to compare chiropractic treatment to other care.