



# Will Losing Weight Reduce My Back Pain?

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It's only natural to assume that, along with controlling your risk for heart attack, diabetes, stroke and other degenerative diseases, losing weight can help you get rid of back pain.

As it turns out, it's likely true. Experts agree that losing weight successfully may result in partial or complete back pain relief.

For example, Dr. Andre Panagos, physiatrist and director of Spine and Sports Medicine in New York notes, "although research on weight loss and back pain is minimal, in my clinic, every single person who loses a significant amount of weight finds their pain to be significantly improved."

The reason for this, Panagos explains, is that if you are heavier than your ideal weight, your muscles will need to work harder in order to help you accomplish everyday tasks. Plus, the extra load that is put on the spine can take vertebrae out of alignment.

"When you lose weight, you are effectively reducing strain on your spinal column and on your back muscles," he adds.

## Weight Loss and Back Pain - What is Thin Enough?

As Dr. Panagos commented (above) although research has yet to find a causal relationship between obesity and back pain, patients and practitioners alike believe there is an association. More and more, health professionals are directing their patients toward making common sense choices, such as maintaining a physically active lifestyle and keeping weight in check, for managing (and preventing) back pain.

How thin is thin enough? Many experts recommend staying within 10 pounds of your ideal weight to keep your back healthy and pain free.

And don't forget: Weight loss offers other benefits beyond the well-being of your back. As you've likely heard, shedding the extra pounds may help prevent serious health problems such as heart disease, cancer or diabetes.

## Physical Activity - Double Benefits of Weight Loss and Back Health

Whether it's a back ache or the threat of a some other health issue that gets you going on a weight loss program, putting forth the effort is what gets you there.

Along with maintaining a healthy diet that restricts calories, engaging in regular physical activity is crucial to achieving your ideal weight. The good news is that physical activity also helps manage back pain. Studies on recreational activities show that fit people have less back pain.

And experts agree that exercise is very often the best way to treat, manage and prevent chronic low back pain. In fact, the *American Family Physician* reports that adhering to an aggressive exercise program **as administered by a physical therapist** may even help you to avoid the need for back surgery.

While exercise is highly touted for reducing back pain, some conditions warrant safety modifications. Ask your doctor or physical therapist for guidance on this. Meanwhile, here are a few tips:

- Try to find the right level of intensity and time -- not too much, not too little. If you have acute low back pain or sciatica, for example, a good rule of thumb might be to set a goal of avoiding bed rest, but also remaining pain-free as you resume your daily activities. (Exercise is not recommended for an acute low back injury.)
- If you just can't get comfortable with exercise, or it seems as though your pain follows your every move, you may want to try an even gentler approach. Activities that seek to relax tension and realign your body posture may help condition muscles and lubricate joints. In turn, this may help prevent re-injury. Some examples of the gentler approach might include a water exercise routine or restorative yoga pose sequence that consists of:
  - pelvic tilts

- spinal twist
  - cat-cow stretch
  - tadasana
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- Also, a restorative series of Pilates exercises, aptly named pre-pilates, will likely give you a full body range of motion and gentle abdominal workout.
  - Other activities that develop body awareness and/or postural control are tai chi and Feldenkrais.

## Exercise Programs for Weight Loss and Back Pain Reduction

A 2016 study found that general exercise programs may help you reduce chronic non-specific low back pain. Such a program might include strength training, stretching and aerobic activity. The study authors say that developing flexibility may help improve functional movement, and aerobic activity may increase blood flow and nutrients that go to the soft tissues of the body.

This, in turn, may help reduce back stiffness.

And don't forget your core. The researchers say that a strong core plays an important role in support of the low back.

If you're not used to exercising, the next section may help get you going.

## Aerobic Activity and Back Pain

A key ingredient in nearly every type of weight loss program, aerobic activity is any rhythmic motion that uses the large muscles of the body and is maintained continuously for at least 10 minutes. Obviously, choosing activities that minimize pounding on your joints is best if your back is hurting. Walking, and in particular, cycling, swimming and aquatic exercise are good low and moderate impact activity choices.

One half hour of aerobic activity, performed 5 days per week is the amount generally recommended for realizing health benefits. If that's too much, start with less and build up to the recommended amount over a period of weeks or months.

You can also accumulate workouts throughout the day. For example, walking for 15 minutes twice per day counts as 1/2 hour of aerobic exercise in one day.

## Strength, Flexibility and Back Pain

It's well-known that strengthening and stretching trunk muscles, (especially the abdominals) and muscles around the hips provides support for upright body posture and for the spine itself. A regular practice of yoga, Pilates or other mind-body workout can help you do just that. These types of programs help develop balanced strength in the muscles that control the pelvis and trunk. This, in turn, can protect your back by facilitating an even wear and tear on your joints and by taking load off your spine. See above for a few ideas.

By the way, if you are morbidly obese (i.e., 100 or more pounds overweight or a BMI of 40, or you are 35 years of age or older and experiencing obesity related health issues such as high blood pressure,) you should work with your doctor to lose the weight. In fact, it's best to speak with your doctor before embarking on any weight loss program.