



Eight Causes of Low Back Issues (and the stretches and exercises to solve them)

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It's probably no surprise that almost all of us will experience some form of low back issue, if we haven't already. And while the causes of low back discomfort, stiffness, immobility, pain, and other distress are as varied as the people who suffer from it, there are some common muscle and posture imbalances that are often contributing factors, if not the primary underlying cause. Address these imbalances, and you can help minimize your risk of problems down the road. The following are eight of the most common of these imbalances, and suggested stretches* and exercises* to help correct them.

**As always, be sure to get a doctor's clearance before embarking on any exercises or stretches, and stop immediately if you feel any pain or discomfort.*

Not sure what these stretches and exercises look like?

Members of theflexibilitycoach.com can click on the hyperlink of each stretch and exercise and pull up a clear, detailed photo of the position for easy reference!



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1. Tight Hamstrings

Few of us are without some tightness in our hamstrings. Not only do we use these muscles heavily whenever we walk, use the stairs, and participate in sports and fitness activities, but sitting in a chair (with knees bent) keeps the hamstrings in a shortened state as well. When this happens, our body will try to make up for the lack of mobility in the back of our legs by altering its posture and gait, resulting in pulling and pressure on the low back

Solution: Perform hamstring stretches, such as the Kneeling Pyramid or Stairway "Miracle" Hamstring Stretch, daily.

2. Tight Glutes

Not surprisingly, we also tend to be tight in our gluteal and hip muscles, largely due to the stabilization these muscles provide our pelvis when we walk. The result is similar to tight hamstrings: we lack mobility in our hips, which impacts the low back muscles.

Solution: Perform 1-2 different glute stretches regularly, holding each stretch long enough to feel your muscles relax. Examples include the Forward Bending Pigeon and the Seated Glute Stretch.

3. Weak Glutes

Frustratingly, our glutes also tend to be weak, which increases the burden on our low back.

Solution: Perform 2-3 different glute/hip exercises, ideally ones that hit several different areas of the glutes, such as the Bridge, the Clamshell exercise, and the Half Locust, aiming for 8-12 slow, controlled repetitions, and holding the final repetition for 1-2 breaths.

4. Tight Low Back Muscles in the Frontal and Transverse Planes, and Extension positions

While the low back is often overstretched while we sit, that's only in the sagittal plane (as in, a forward flex position of the trunk). By contrast, our low back muscles are often very tight when it comes to other

dimensions of movement, which further predisposes these muscles for injury.

Solution: Include twists, side stretches, and extended back stretches in your flexibility workout. Examples of each include Supine Twist, Triangle, and Elbow Cobra.

5. Weak Abdominal/Core Muscles

Although our abdominal muscles are shortened when we sit, paradoxically they are not strong. More over, our deep core muscles – the ones they don't talk about in "ab toner" infomercials – are often extremely weak, since it usually takes a deliberate decision to engage them in order for them to be activated throughout the day.

Solution: Include a variety of abdominal and core strengthening exercises and positions, such as Modified Boat and Elbow Plank, in your fitness routine. Also, whenever you find yourself standing for long periods, make an effort to stand up straight and "draw in" your belly button, to train your body to seek good posture instinctively.

6. Tight Hip Flexors

Often the forgotten thigh muscle, tight hip flexors are largely due to the shortened position they are in whenever we sit. Having tight hip flexors often results in a pelvic tilt that causes the low spine to "round" out of a neutral alignment, which in turn can put pressure on the low back discs.

Solution: Include a stretch for the quads (such as Side-lying Dancer) and one for the hip flexors (Kneeling Crescent Pose is a good example) in your routine.

7. Tight Chest

You might not think of the chest as having anything to do with the low back. But given the upper body positions/movements we have going most of the day – arms out in front of us, neck flexed forward, our chest tends to be tight, which results in more of a slouched upper body posture. Anytime you alter one part of the back, you put pressure on the rest.

Solution: A quick and easy chest/arm stretch, such as the Doorframe Chest Stretch, can be your best friend in keeping the chest muscles loose.

8. Weak Upper Back

In a similar vein to number 7 above, with our seated positions and movements of our arms in front of us, our upper back becomes weak, further enhancing a slouched upper body posture, which in turn further affects the low back.

Solution: Postures that help strengthen the upper back (Reverse Plank is a good example), plus periodic "squeeze-backs" of your shoulder blades, can help offset the weakness caused by our daily activities.

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