

How to Banish Backache by Dr B B Sahi

Dr B B Sahi looks at simple but effective postures we can all implement to beat the backache blues

Most of us I am sure have at some point in our adult lives suffered from the nagging and in some cases debilitating pain of backache. Yoga can be a great cure for ailments of the spine and can be an effective way of practically improving the alignment of your back. Asanas place great emphasis on maintaining the natural posture of the spine and strengthening the muscles that keep it pliable and flexible.

Nature has provided us with long, strong and hardy bones in the back region of the body. The spine is made up of thirty- three small bones called vertebrae. These are held together by ropes called ligaments and in turn are protected by muscles which are strongest in the body.

So why have we been provided with such good protection to this area of the body? The simple answer to this is that the spine, or back, carries out very important jobs in the overall functioning of our body. To understand its role in the daily functioning of the body and how we can address pain management, we first need to have some understanding of its physical composition.

Within the vertebrae of the back there is a canal, known as the "spinal canal", in which runs the spinal cord. The spinal cord is the tail of the brain and descends to the near end tail of the spine, stopping a few inches short, at the level of second lumbar vertebra.

At the junction of these two vertebrae there is a hole on each side, through which emerges the spinal nerves. These nerves service and supply muscles, skin and other organs situated in the respective area. They also carry the information and orders to the brain which allow us to deal with situations and function on a daily basis. We can begin to understand therefore that these nerves play a very important & vital role in the functioning of the body.

The back bone is divided into different regions:

- Cervical region, the neck area
- Dorsal region, the chest area
- Lumbar region, the abdominal area
- Sacral region, the pelvic area
- Coccygeal region, the vestigial tail

Out of these regions, the bones of the lumbar area are the strongest and are protected by thick, strong muscles. This is because it has to endure the traumas and weight of our body whilst we are seated and is the area of the spine where most wear and tear takes place. Seeing how we spend 40- 50% of our whole lives sitting, we need the lumbar region to be tough and resilient. Back problems most commonly affect the lumbar region and when it is confined to this area alone it is called lumbago.

Many back problems and aches are caused by faulty posture. Most of us have a bad habit of walking with a hunch in the dorsal region, sitting with a hunch in the lower dorsal/upper lumbar region and lying in unaligned postures. Back strains and sprains are more common whilst bending suddenly or after an injury.

As we get older, or if we suffer repeated back trauma, muscles can also go into spasms as they lose their elasticity. In old age back ache can also be caused due to the "brittleness" of the vertebrae (osteoporosis) or due to the degeneration of these bones from wear and tear. This stimulates the muscles, sending them into spasms, or it can press on the nerves causing nervous pain.

In yoga great emphasis has been given to the spinal region. This is largely because it is thought that the main energy of our emotional body which surrounds the physical body, the aura, runs along the spine in Sushmana Nadi. This is synonymous with the central spinal canal. Whilst the energy travels in this canal in both directions, it mostly travels upwards from Muladhara chakra to Sahasrara chakra. With this action, energy is supplied to all parts of the body through different nadis or nerves.

Correct posture whether we are sitting, standing or walking is vital in looking after our spinal region. There are more than forty yoga asanas which have been ascribed for this purpose, of which I have selected four which can easily be performed by every individual.

TRIKONASANA (TRIANGLE POSE)

Performed whilst standing.

- Stand straight whilst keeping feet apart two-three feet.
- On the inhale raise the right arm upwards with the elbow straight and the middle of the upper arm touching the right ear.
- On the exhale bend towards the left side of the body, keeping the left arm sliding along the left leg but straight at the elbow. With gradual practice the left hand may reach and touch the ground. Maintain this position for several breaths, as long as feels comfortable.
- On the inhale return back to the original standing position and repeat on the other side.

This asana bends the spine laterally (sideways), relaxes the muscles and ligaments on the side of bending, and stretches muscles and ligaments on the opposite side. It helps in maintaining the lateral flexibility of the spine.

PADMASANA (LOTUS POSTION)

Performed whilst sitting

- Begin in a seated position with folded knees and the soles of the feet facing upwards on the lap.
- Ensure the back is kept erect and straight and the hands are either clinching the knees or are kept on the knees with palms facing upwards and thumb and index finger joined in a circular fashion.

This asana helps in maintaining the normal posture of the spine whilst seated. It is thought that when the spine is straight, energy travels through the energy body, the aura, in an unhindered fashion and ensures all parts of the body get an uninterrupted energy supply.

TARHASANA (HORIZONTAL STRETCH)

Performed whilst lying down

- Begin by lying flat on the back with both arms extended above the head.
- Keeping the mind focused on the belly button, on the inhale stretch the whole body from toes to fingertips. Every joint of the body should feel like it is being stretched.
- Keeping the belly button as the fulcrum the body, feel like you are stretching the top part of your body upwards and the lower part downwards.

This is the most effective and simplest asana for beginners, which stretches all the body's muscles and ligaments. It helps in maintaining the curvature of the spine by stretching it out completely.

USTASANA (CAMEL POSITION)

Performed whilst standing on flexed knees.

- Begin upright on flexed knees, keeping them apart by about two feet, and ensure the spine is kept absolutely straight.
- Join the thumbs together and place on the lumbar region of the back at the level of the belly button.
- On the inhale press the thumbs gradually forwards, bending the spine backwards as far as comfortably possible.
- Release the thumbs and place the hands on the soles of the feet, hunching like a camel. Stay in this position as long as you feel comfortable.
- Return the hands back to their initial position and gradually extend the spine until it is erect.

This asana helps in making the spine flexible and muscles pliable. In so doing we can avoid / cure most of the ailments of the back.

For comprehensive understanding of the vedic energy system the reader is referred to a book called Vital Energy by Dr B B Sahi.

Dr B B Sahi worked in London as a General Practitioner for over twenty years and has recently taken early retirement to dedicate his time to his interest in yoga. He is also a specialist in Ophthalmology, Psycho-sexual Problems including contraception, Developmental Pediatrics, and Human Energy. His second book is called Evolution of Yoga.

