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Running from back pain

You don't move, your back hurts. You move too much, your back hurts.
It's time to find the sweet spot.

BY DRS. MARCO AND PAOLO DE CIANTIS

For many runners, "going the distance" can lead to pain and discomfort in the lower back, threatening their ability to run. Spinal discs and various joints can get jarred and compressed because the back has to do a lot of work to maintain an upright position while running. Fit or not, the unfortunate but realistic fact is that about 80% of the North American population will experience back pain at some point in their lives. Not to worry—there are tweaks you can make to your running routine that won't leave your back aching or sore.

Barefoot vs. sneakers

There's been a growing trend toward barefoot running, but how does it affect the back? Most notably, when you're running without shoes, bio-mechanical changes occur that alter the lumbar spine's range of motion. Specifically, the initial foot-to-surface contact switches from a heel strike to a forefoot (ball of the foot) strike.

Recent studies investigating how a change in foot strike affects lumbar lordosis (excessive inward curvature of the spine) conclude that running with a heel strike is a more comfortable running pattern. However, your personal comfort depends on your body. Barefoot running does not affect flexion or extension of the lumbar spine.

Uphill vs. downhill

What goes up must come down. When planning your route, remember that running uphill is better for your spine.

According to a number of studies, even sufferers of uncomplicated chronic low-back pain will benefit from moderate, but regular, physical activity.

Lower back pain is often a result of stress and stiffness, and downhill running exerts more stress on the muscles and the joints. While uphill runs require more energy, they produce less impact and encourage spinal flexion.

Treadmill vs. pavement

Those who suffer from low-back pain may want to consider switching to the treadmill. The machine has a little spring to it, providing shock absorption and a lower-impact run. Though it may not be as visually stimulating as hitting the streets and trails, the same muscles are activated so it's still worth your while.

Three ways to decrease running-related back pain

1. Invest in a quality pair of running shoes and be sure to replace them regularly. The support and fresh cushioning will help reduce impact that can cause low-back pain.
2. Keep runs short, especially if you're relatively new to the sport. Running for 20 minutes at a time can reduce potential strain on the lower back.
3. Lead with your chest and keep a tall stance to reduce an up-and-down

stride and emphasize more of a forward motion.

According to a number of studies, even sufferers of uncomplicated chronic low-back pain will benefit from moderate, but regular, physical activity that does not increase the risk of acute pain.

However, keep in mind that before you begin or resume a running routine, or any other sport, you should always discuss it with a medical professional first.

2

Drs. Marco and Paolo De Ciantis are Toronto-based chiropractic doctors and co-owners of Sports Specialist Rehab Centre. The identical twins specialize in pain and injury prevention, working with a range of patients from athletes looking to improve their performance to individuals who simply want day-to-day tasks to be easier, in an effort to restore optimal well-being.

