

BACK CARE TIPS FOR GARDENERS

When gardening, as with all types of exercise, warming up before you start reduces the risk of strain or injury. Do a series of simple stretching exercises to loosen hips and spine and shoulder joints.

The following exercises are shown only as a guide. For advice about the exercise's suitability for you, speak to your osteopath or your medical practitioner. All exercises should be carried out slowly within a comfortable range of movement and repeated 3-4 times. Wrap up warm but avoid wearing tight trousers or jeans which can restrict bending at the knees and hips and reduce circulation in the legs

Standing exercises

Gently swing your arms backwards and forwards then shrug/roll your shoulders forwards and backwards.

Place your hands on your hips and rotate pelvis in circular motion a few times, clockwise then anti-clockwise

Calf muscle stretch - stand facing a wall, arms length away. Keeping your feet hip width apart, move your right foot forward about half way to the wall. Place your hands flat on the wall at shoulder height. Keeping your back straight, lean forwards, bending your arms and your front leg. Feel a stretch in your left leg. Move farther away from the wall if necessary to get a good stretch. Hold 5 seconds. Repeat 5 times each side.

Hamstring stretch - stand with your back against the wall, feet hip width apart. Keeping your right leg straight, move it forward as far as comfortable, allowing your back to slide down the wall and your left knee to bend. Keeping your back straight, bend forwards until you feel a stretch down the back of the right leg. You can rest your hands on either thigh to help maintain balance. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 times each side.

Floor exercises

Low back stretch – lie on your back with both knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Keeping your knees and ankles together, gently rock your legs a little way side to side 10-15 times.

Pelvic tilt - an exercise to strengthen the lower back. Lie on your back with your knees bent, feet flat on the floor. You may feel a slight arch in the small of your back. Take a deep breath in and as you breathe out, tilt your pelvis upwards, gently flattening your lower back to the floor and raising your buttocks slightly. Hold for 5 seconds then return to starting position. Repeat 3-4 times

If any exercise causes pain or dizziness, do not continue

Choosing equipment

- Plan to have the mower serviced before the season starts, and if buying a new mower consider electric start. Sharpen tools as necessary.
- Small or lightweight spades and forks reduce the weight lifted. Consider long-handled tools to increase the mechanical advantage and reduce unnecessary bending

- If purchasing new equipment, look out for ergonomically designed tools or those specifically adapted to make tasks easier.
- Consider a two-wheeled wheelbarrow, but with any type always place the load over the wheel to keep the centre of gravity low.
- A garden work bench is ideally 2" below elbow height, this avoids stooping

Mind your movements

Low back injuries, including muscular and ligamentous strains and spinal (facet) joint injury, are common among gardeners. They are usually associated with prolonged bending and poor lifting technique. Start by tackling light jobs first that do not require too much bending. Change position and activities every 15-30 minutes and vary your work to include strenuous and less strenuous work. Take frequent breaks from bending and do gentle stretches to ease your spine and joints.

Digging is best done with a straight back, exerting any force through knees and thighs, and for short periods only. Try to avoid digging if the soil is too wet or too dry.

Adopt a fencing position when hoeing or raking – one foot in front of the other, transferring your weight from the back to the front foot and back again, rather than bending from the back. If you feel pain at any time, the golden rule is STOP! Pain or discomfort is a warning sign so don't ignore it.

When using a hover mower or strimmer, don't use side to side movements as this causes excess lower back rotation

Do not over-reach – weeding and planting can be dangerous tasks when the back is bent and stretched too far and for too long. If you have to work close to the ground do not stoop; if you cannot kneel, sit on a small stool rather than bend.

Using a kneeling mat helps to reduce strain and pressure on the knee joints and insulates them from cold ground. A kneeling pad with side handles can be helpful.

Avoid wrist problems by taking care not to put too much pressure on your free hand if you are using it to help weight bearing when kneeling. Pruning, clipping, planting etc can also put a strain on the wrist. Keep your wrist straight to minimise this.

Lifting

Be aware of your own limitations and consider the weight and size of things before lifting.

Stand as close to the object as possible, in a stable position with feet apart and one foot slightly forward. Bend your knees, though not fully, and bend your back very slightly. Grip the load firmly, as close to your waist as possible and straighten using your leg muscles. Avoid twisting or bending sideways. Keep the load close as you carry it. Avoid overloading your spade and wheelbarrow, clear rubbish into small bags to minimise heavy lifting.

When you've finished the gardening admire your handiwork, then run through your warm up routine again. If possible follow this with a hot bath or shower to relax your muscles.

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