

## **Tool #1 to Stop Back Pain - Simple Walking**

It is so simple but true. Walking can have a healing effect on the back and back pain. Think of yourself as the tin man in the Wizard of Oz. Rusted to the point of no movement. Give him a little oil and start moving and he is as good as new! Your joints, (and your spine has a lot of joints), love movement and they have their own natural lubrication oil - synovial fluid. The more you walk, the more the joints can self-lubricate and the more the muscles of the back can start to strengthen. Your body also puts out its own natural drugs called endorphins, which can help with pain relief. Aim for three times per day. Work up to 15-20 minutes. But you say it is painful to walk? There may be 7 reasons for the pain.

- 1) You're an EXTENDER. You might have spondylolisthesis or spinal stenosis, and your back feels you're better sitting. You may want to start your walking program with a wheeled walker or shopping cart. A cane might be enough or double walking sticks may be enough.
- 2) You are a FLEXOR, and your posture is incorrect with the walking, and you are putting increased strain on the back. Posture is always huge. Your spine can handle great loads when it is in the correct position. Not so much when it is not in good form. We can use a broom handle or an alternative to assess your walking posture. Place the handle in place as follows. Your bottom palm is facing out and your top palm is facing forward. The handle should have 3 contact points on your body
  - a. Sacrum or pelvis
  - b. Mid-back
  - c. Back of head: If your head is not touching attempt to correct it. Ideally, all three should contact the handle and all three should remain in contact while walking.



You can also correct your posture while walking by using your right hand to grasp the left wrist behind your back. In this position pull your shoulders back and straighten your back.



Then do a chin tuck. A chin tuck is when you tuck in your chin and work to bring your ears over your shoulders. Your head is not going down nor is it going up. It is merely going back as though someone is going to throw a pie in your face and you are backing your head away from it.



Maintain this position and begin to swing your arms normally as you continue walking.

- 3) You are walking too slowly. Yes! You can overload the spine when walking slowly as compared to a quicker pace. When I have hurt my back in the past, my goal is to get back to running by the next day. You would think the “pounding” of running would increase the pain of the spine, however in my case, the self-lubricating nature of the movement AND the increased oxygen to all the muscles, ligament, tendons, and tissues of the back was more beneficial despite the increased load on the spine. When you walk too slow the tendency is to lean back on the spine

and let it settle into a flexed harmful posture. We want you to lead with your chest and build up enough speed so that you are slightly leaning forward. Pick up the pace of your walking and make sure to swing your arms naturally. The movement of your arms can also serve to increase movement, blood flow, and oxygen to your back. I have had patients who walked with stiff backs and motionless arms. Their muscles look tight, and less healing is occurring.

- 4) You are going too far to start. You may need to work up to it incrementally. Determine how far you can walk before the pain begins. Start in your house and walk across the room. Try to increase the amount of walking one can do each day before the pain begins. If your pain begins immediately you may need to perform some of the stretches for a few days before re-trying the walking. The stretches and improvement in posture can make a significant difference in pain levels.
- 5) You may have to unweight your spine to walk. You might try double walking sticks, a cane, or double canes to start. AVOID hills and stairs. Stick to the flat surfaces.



- 6) You are taking too long of strides causing a reaction force at your heel which reverberates up your leg and into your spine.



- 7) The running world has discovered this years ago. They advocate a leaning forward posture with shorter and quicker strides. Less impact on the joints and greater speed and efficiency. Shorten your strides combined with the quicker pace. Try to have your forefoot and your heel hit at nearly the same time. Wear comfortable shoes with adequate cushion and arch support.
- 8) You are not intermittently decompressing the spine. One method for decompressing the spine is to lean onto the back of a park bench.



Allow the back to relax and continue for a count of 10 seconds. Repeat 3-5X as needed. For further methods on decompressing the spine, check out our video in this series under level 2.

Be careful when walking dogs on a leash. The constant or even sporadic pull on the leash by your pet could be causing a torque on your back resulting in pain. Try walking without your dog and compare it to when you do. If you have increased pain with the pet, you will need to build up your core trunk muscles first before resuming pet walks.