

5 Spine-specific Stretches

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Rather than a cause, exercise is both a preventive measure against and a treatment for lower back pain. Let's now look closer at specific stretches and exercises that promote spinal flexibility and strength.

For nearly all of these exercises, body weight is all that's needed. As you become stronger and the exercises become easier, you can perform them with wrist and ankle weights. In general, do one set of 15 to 25 repetitions; this should be the most you can do.

Reverse Trunk Twist. Lie on your back with your arms at your sides, palms face-down and in line with your shoulders. Bring your thighs up perpendicular to your trunk and slowly lower them alternately to each side. This exercise also strengthens the abdominal oblique muscles.

Side Bend. Stand with your arms stretched overhead, hands clasped together and feet shoulder-width apart. Lean as far as possible to one side, return and then lean to the opposite side. Avoid pain here, however; side bending can increase a lumbar disc bulge.

Weighted Side Bend. Stand with your arms alongside your body, holding a dumbbell in one hand. Your feet should again be shoulder-width apart. Bend your trunk to the dumbbell side; return to the initial position and over as far as possible to the opposite side. Repeat several times and then perform with the dumbbell in the opposite hand.

Full Back Stretch. To do this stretch you need an adjustable strap secured to either a high beam or door, handles approximately chest-high. Grasp the handles so that your palms face one another, and slowly lower yourself in a squat while maintaining the normal curvature of the spine. This forces your latissimus dorsi and connective tissue to stretch as they hold the vertebrae in normal alignment.

The above exercises stretch and strengthen the lower back muscles in all of their actions. To develop a "muscular corset" around the midsection that will hold the spine in its anatomically correct, safe position, it's also necessary to strengthen the abdominals in all their actions. The first exercise, the reverse trunk twist, is one of the best to strengthen the abdominal oblique rotational muscles through their full range of motion, in addition to stretching the lower back muscles. It helps to prevent excessive twisting of the shoulders when running. A second abdominal exercise that's highly effective is the reverse sit-up.

Reverse Sit-Up. Lie on your back with your knees bent, thighs perpendicular to trunk, and arms alongside your body. Bring your feet off the floor and lift your pelvis as though trying to touch your knees to your face. Push down with your hands to assist if necessary. When this variant becomes easy, place your arms over your head and use only the abdominals to lift your pelvis.

As your back gets stronger, both running and everyday living feel better. The benefits of a strong back-or, more specifically, a strong and healthy midsection-are legion. For more information on these and other exercises for the lower back, see my texts *Explosive Running* and *Kinesiology of Exercise*. You may also visit www.dryessis.com.