

A good long swim stretches and strengthens back muscles.



PUT YOUR BACK INTO IT

If you support your back, it will support you. Here are four workouts that will help you feel stronger and stand taller. BY NANCY RIPTON

A strong and sturdy back is crucial to keeping everything else on the up and up. And back pain is, well, a pain in the back (and the neck, shoulders and knees)—once you're out of alignment, everything goes. In fact, it's one of the most common chronic conditions, according to Statistics Canada, with four out of five adults experiencing at least one episode of back pain in their lives. In 85 to 90 percent of

people with back pain, no specific cause can be pinpointed, but poor muscle tone (particularly, in the back and abs), a sedentary lifestyle and poor posture are key factors.

One of the best ways to reduce your risk is to boost your back strength so you can support your spine and maintain proper posture throughout the day. Here are four workouts ideal for strengthening your back and helping you stand tall and pain-free. →

WATER WORKOUTS

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What it is: Swimming lengths in a pool and taking aqua-fitness classes—essentially, in-water aerobics—are great choices for boosting your back, plus the water takes the impact out of the workout, making it less stressful on joints.

How to do it: Decide whether you like to swim solo or in a group. Swimming laps is relaxing, methodical and affordable, while aqua-fit classes are fun for those who like to train in a more social environment and perfect for people who need more guidance and motivation.

The results: If you have any question about how effective swimming is at building back strength, just look at the physique of any competitive swimmer. “Using your arms to propel you through the water will provide balanced back strength,” says Gloria Atkinson, the group fitness director at the Ontario Racquet Club in Mississauga, Ont.

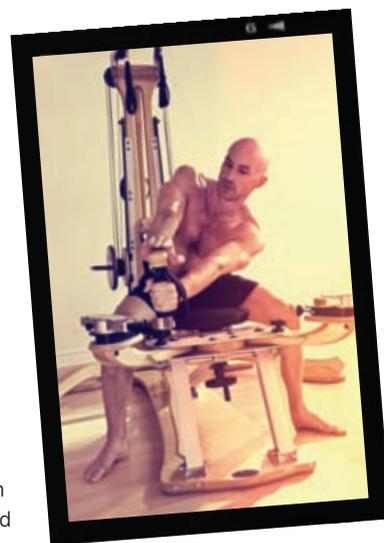
BARRE CLASS

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What it is: Ballet-inspired barre classes deliver the strength and posture of a dancer without needing the co-ordination of Karen Kain. Barre classes focus on moves that train the smaller supporting muscles needed for good posture and back strength.

How to do it: The classes use weighted balls and resistance bands along with your own body weight to get results. The one- to three-pound balls may feel light at first, but don’t let that fool you. “You’ll be surprised how challenging the class is,” says Sandra Vadasz, the communications director for Barreworks in Toronto. “Expect to feel it the next day.”

The results: Because you have a barre to assist with balance, you can focus on lifting your head, relaxing your shoulders and executing movements with proper technique. “Barre classes make you stand straight and really work on posture,” says Vadasz.



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GYROTONIC

What it is: This movement practice was originally designed for dancers, but it now reportedly has devotees such as recent Wimbledon champ Andy Murray, Kim Cattrall and Madonna. The method has its roots in yoga, tai chi and dance and features seamless movements with the help of custom-designed Gyrotonic equipment that uses pulley, friction and weighted resistance. Unlike most linear workouts, the practice is built on rotating and spiralling movements that strengthen the core and promote better balance, posture and co-ordination. Proponents of the method also say the fluidity helps massage the core and encourage detoxification.

How to do it: It’s done in one-on-one sessions with a specialized trainer that last an hour. Stretching and strengthening exercises are performed on Gyrotonic equipment that arches and curls the spine and lengthens muscles. Gyrotonic studios are popping up in larger cities; as the buzz grows, the practice is expanding its reach.

The results: “Gyrotonic increases the space between the vertebrae,” says Crispin Redhead, the owner of Gyrotonic Toronto by Crispin. It simultaneously stretches and strengthens the muscles and tendons while articulating and mobilizing joints. This means that Gyrotonic can literally change the way your back looks and feels after just one session. You will stand taller and feel more limber and you’ll look and feel immediately different, but “it’s not a quick fix,” warns Redhead. A once-weekly session is encouraged to maintain the positive changes in your back strength and posture.

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PILATES

What it is: The primary focus of Pilates is to strengthen the core and back muscles and train the deeper muscles that support the spine and joints. “People sometimes get back problems because they only focus on abdominals and ignore the lower back,” says Stefania Della Pia, the Toronto-based senior program director and education and master instructor trainer for Merrithew Health & Fitness (Stott Pilates). “You need balance.”

How to do it: Pilates is all about the details, so start with the basic moves and work with an instructor to make sure you’re executing them correctly. “If you progress to more advanced moves too quickly, you’ll miss the subtleties [of how each one should look and feel] and the essence or goal of each exercise,” says Della Pia. Private one-on-one or small group classes are a great place to start. Two or three times a week is best for optimal results.

The results: Pilates not only balances your body’s muscle groups but also encourages movements in all dimensions, including flexion, extension and rotation of the spine, all while teaching you how to breathe properly. “When we breathe incorrectly, it can create unnecessary tension in the spine, neck and shoulder areas,” says Della Pia. You need to focus on starting each move from a tension-free position.

Photography, courtesy of Barreworks (barre class); Odette Nugara (Gyrotonic).