Watching your back at work prevents not only workplace injuries but it can also help you get through your day feeling less tired. The recipe for improved back health is a combination of a little bit of knowledge, good posture, and some simple exercises.

The back is made up of the spine and the supporting muscles. Your spine is a canal of bones that carries nerves running from the brain to different parts of the body. It is made up of five sections, each having a different number of vertebrae (back bones) in each section. The cervical, thoracic, and lumbar sections are flexible because of small cushions called discs that separate the vertebrae. The bottom sections (sacrum and coccyx) have vertebrae that are fused together so they cannot move. Muscles supporting the spine are found in the neck, back, and abdomen.

Most of a person’s weight is supported by the lumbar (lower back) section of the spine. Pain in the lower back can be caused by muscle strains or spasms, injury or deteriorating discs or bones, or other more serious conditions. The aging process and an inactive lifestyle increase the chances of having low back pain. If you are overweight, smoke, have poor physical condition, use bad posture when doing a job, or have a poor sleeping position, you have a greater chance of experiencing low back pain.

Simple exercises help reduce back injury and pain by stretching & strengthening muscles that help support your spine. This challenge aims at improving lower back flexibility and strength.

**Good Posture Check**

To check your posture, stand in front of a full length mirror and answer the following questions.

**From the front:**
- Is your head held straight and are shoulders level?
- Are your hips level or is one higher than the other?
- Do your knee caps face straight ahead?
- Are your ankles straight or do they roll in or out?

**From the side:**
- Is your head erect with chin parallel to the floor?
- Are your shoulders in line with your ears?
- Is your abdominal wall flat or does it sag forward?
- Do you have a slight forward curve in your low back?
The Challenge:

Add one to two of these exercises/stretches 3-5 days per week during the first week. Week 2, work to include at least one additional stretch.

Exercises/Stretches:

**Knees to Chest**: Lie on your back with knees bent and feet flat on the floor, arms on the floor at your sides. Lift knees to the chest, placing both hands behind your knees. Gently draw knees into chest, feeling a stretch in the low back and glutes.

**Side Stretch**: While standing with one hand on your hip for support, reach the other arm up towards the ceiling, then slightly reach over your head toward the opposite side of the body. This stretch is for all the muscles on the side of the body, from the arm down to the hip.

**Glute Bridge**: Lie on your back with knees bent and feet flat on the floor, arms on the floor at your sides. Slowly lift hips toward ceiling and hold for a few seconds. Slowly lower back down to the floor. Repeat 5 times. Works and stretches low back, glutes/hips, and thighs.

**Cat/Camel**: Position yourself in a neutral position on hands and knees, fingers pointing forward. Engage abdominals which should feel as if you are tightening a corset around your waist. Exhale, tuck your tailbone under and use abdominals muscles to round your back towards the ceiling (cat). Hold for 10-15 seconds. Reverse the movement and tip the tailbone to the ceiling, allowing the abdomen to stretch towards the floor (camel). Pull your shoulder blades down your back. Hold for 10-15 seconds. Return to the starting position. Repeat 5 times. Stretches the back, chest and front/back of shoulders.

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