

Backing Up Your Overall Health

BY BRENNA HOLLAND

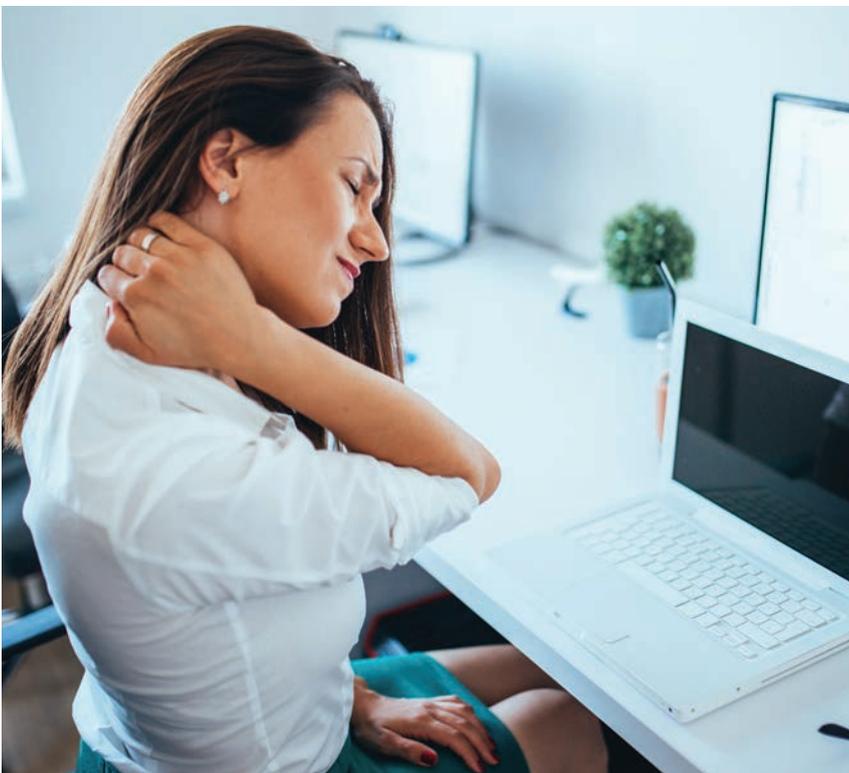
Like many Americans, my workday consists of sitting at a desk, back hunched over my laptop, head craned to one side in the style of the ‘bent-neck lady’ from “The Haunting at Hill House.” Almost never does my back become flush with my overpriced ergonomic chair. Whatever the opposite of being in alignment is, I am that and my body feels it, not alone. Over the course of a lifetime, 60 to 70 percent of us will experience low back pain and about half of us will have significant neck pain. In fact, back and neck pain are two of the top five reasons people go to the doctor.

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“Sometimes I think we don’t realize how important our spine is to our overall health,” Jay Reidler, MD, MPH, an adult and pediatric orthopedic spine surgeon at Englewood Health and Metropolitan Neurosurgery Associates in Englewood, said.

The spine is the channel through which our spinal cord flows. It protects the cord so that it can deliver nerves that are critical to the function of our arms, legs, and the rest of our bodies. The spine also supports our body weight and functions as the conduit between the upper body and lower body.

“In contrast to the thigh and leg—which are also carrying weight but are made of a few long and stiff bones—the spine is composed of many small bones and discs tasked with supporting weight while also providing flexibility and motion,” Dr. Reidler said.



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This, he explains, is why so many of us experience back and neck pain.

“If you look at it from an evolutionary perspective, most mammals walk on four legs and their spine operates like a bridge connecting the front of the body to the back,” Dr. Reidler said.

But for humans—by virtue of the fact that we are bipedal and stand up straight—the spine is essentially a structural column.

“Each level of the spine is supporting the weight of the level above it, and this weight increases as you go down. Which is why the most problematic levels we see are around the bottom. This is one reason why low back pain, in particular, is so prevalent,” Dr. Reidler said.

The delicate nature of the human spine is further complicated by America’s obesity crisis. Carrying extra weight puts undue pressure on those discs and joints in the spine and is often the cause of neck and back pain. Dr. Reidler often counsels his patients on weight loss and, when they successfully shed the pounds, spinal issues sometimes resolve on their own.

Smoking is another common reason Dr. Reidler’s patients develop spine trouble. Ingredients in cigarettes such as nicotine have been found to reduce blood and oxygen supply to bones, weakening spinal bones and making them more susceptible to injury. Smoking has also been associated with development of low back pain. Dr. Reidler often refers his patients to the smoking cessation program at the Graf



Center for Integrative Medicine at Englewood Health as a resource in these instances.

And then we have the issue of ergonomics—namely, our poor posture while at work, while relaxing and while we sleep.

The key is to rid yourself of the postures that put pressure on your spine. Allow yourself to fall into that ergonomic chair you no-doubt purchased when quarantine began. Don’t crane your head down at your phone all day and avoid unnaturally bendy positions while sitting at your desk or while you sleep.

“The vast majority of neck and back pain is not going to need surgery. So, if you pay attention to weight and ergonomics, and couple that with quitting smoking, you will be doing great things for your spine,” Dr. Reidler said.

But when should you discuss neck and back pain with your doctor?

“I’m happy to see people at any stage of their back and neck pain. I’m certainly not going to rush anyone to surgery. There are a host of non-operative solutions to spine pain like physical therapy, acupuncture, massage, yoga, oral medications, and injectable treatments,” Dr. Reidler says.

