

Spine Care Companion: Module 3

How can I be active without injuring myself further?

This handout is for patients with ongoing neck or back pain and explains how to safely bend and lift objects, how physical therapy can help with pain, and how to return to regular exercise.

How do I start to safely bend and lift objects?

At this stage, it is okay to do common daily activities with proper posture and technique. Your physical therapist (PT) or other rehabilitation professional can teach you proper posture and technique for bending and lifting.

When you start lifting objects again, do not lift more than 10 to 15 pounds. Remember that the “smarter” you lift, the safer you will be.

You will develop proper posture and lifting techniques over time. This will take commitment to focus on how you are moving and bending.

General tips:

- If you must lift something heavy, keep your back straight and bend with your knees.
- When reaching for a low object, bend with wide legs and keep your back as straight as possible. This will cause less strain on your spine.

Can physical therapy help with my pain?

Absolutely. PTs will safely guide you through the early stages of recovery. PTs can also treat tight and sore muscles, teach you to strengthen weak muscles, and help you resume your usual activities.

Muscles that are spasming and tight may feel more sore after starting exercise. This soreness should be much better by the next day.

However, if your soreness lasts more than 48 hours after therapy, talk to your PT about adjusting your treatment. Soreness usually does not mean you have been injured further. It is very unlikely that physical therapy will cause you more harm.

My muscles feel weaker, so how do I begin a strengthening program?

Building strength is a key part of recovery. If you have tight or weak muscles, other muscles may make up for the weak ones. This can cause abnormal strain on your back, hips, or shoulders. Muscle strengthening will support your spine, help you keep proper posture, and protect your spine during activities.

Your spine is supported by several layers of muscle that wrap around your abdomen. This is known as your *core*. Activating your core creates a natural brace that protects your spine.

Physical therapy can provide you with safe and effective exercises for your spine. You will usually start with core strengthening exercises. Your strengthening program will advance as you build strength and confidence with your movements.

How hard should I push myself?

“No pain, no gain” is an old saying that does not apply to people who are recovering from pain episodes. Do not ignore pain in the early stages of your injury and recovery.

A general tip is to avoid activities or positions that cause sharp pain or cause the pain to radiate to the leg or arm.

Follow the “slow and steady” approach. Do smaller amounts of activity as you start your recovery and gradually increase. Remember to take breaks. There is no need to “conquer” your pain.

Mild soreness and discomfort are expected when resuming movements and exercise. However, these symptoms should improve within 24 to 48 hours.

How quickly can I get back to regular exercise?

This will depend on several factors including how severe your pain is, if nerve pain is involved, and how quickly you respond to treatment.

With minor pain, you might be able to resume regular activities within a few days to 2 weeks. With more severe injuries, or if discs or nerves are involved, you might not resume normal exercise for several weeks or more.

Recovery varies from person to person. It is best to discuss your goals with your spine care provider(s) so that your treatment plan is made in partnership with your care team.