While your back is a complex system of bones, nerves, discs, muscles and other tissues, keeping it healthy actually is fairly straightforward. A survey of North American Spine Society members revealed the top nine "back-to-basics" tips spine experts wish their patients followed. For more information on keeping your back healthy, visit www.KnowYourBack.org.

1. Exercise regularly to improve overall health and reduce the chance of back pain.

To stay healthy, your spine needs a regular regimen of stretching, strengthening and aerobic conditioning exercises, such as swimming, yoga, light weights and walking. Without exercise, your muscles can become weak and deconditioned, which can lead to back pain and injury. Work with a spine specialist to find the right exercises to help you stay healthy, strong, stress- and pain-free.

2. Do not smoke!

Many spine experts report that smokers are prone to more back pain than nonsmokers. It is believed that smoking restricts blood flow to the discs that cushion your vertebrae, reduces calcium absorption and prevents new bone growth. Many spine surgeons are reluctant to perform certain surgeries, such as fusion, on patients who smoke because it can prevent or slow healing.

3. Maintain a healthy body weight.

Extra weight, particularly in the mid-section or belly, shifts your body's center of gravity forward and places unneeded strain on your back muscles and the surrounding tissues. It also is possible to be too thin, as extreme thinness can be accompanied by low bone mass and place you at risk for osteoporosis. Working with your doctor, determine your ideal body weight and try and stay within 10 pounds of that weight.

4. Keep your core muscles strong.

Weak or tight "core" (back and abdominal) muscles cannot support your back properly, leading to pain and injury risk. Work with a spine specialist to find exercises that stretch and strengthen your back and abdominal muscles, such as yoga or Pilates.

5. Use proper body mechanics when you lift, bend or stretch.

If you must lift or move something heavy, do it safely. Find a partner to share the load. Instead of pulling or lifting a heavy object, push it. To reduce stress on the lower spine and reduce injuries, squat close to the object, keep its weight close to your body and keep your back straight and head up—do not bend over to lift.

6. Check and alter your posture frequently while using your laptop, smartphone or tablet.

Thanks to technology, injuring our backs has never been easier! Hunching over our tablets, smartphones and laptops all day and night can cause painful neck and back strain. Being "connected" 24 hours a day can actually add stress to our lives, which can lead to back pain. If you want to limit your back pain, limit your electronic gadget usage. If you must use your gadgets, keep a neutral posture, with the screen at eye level whenever possible. Get up, stretch and take a walk every 30 minutes or so.

7. Reduce stress.

There is a strong connection between stress and back pain. The "fight or flight" response our body has to stress can cause back muscles to tighten or spasm painfully. It's critical to reduce stress as much as possible, even if it means turning off the smartphone after work, seeing a therapist, learning relaxation techniques or exercising more regularly. By managing stress well, we can help prevent back pain from occurring in the first place.

8. Keep healthy, strong bones by taking calcium, vitamin D and doing weight-bearing exercises.

Because our spine has 33 of our body's 206 bones, our back's health is linked to our overall bone health. To reduce the chance of your bones thinning (osteoporosis), check with your health provider or spine specialist about how much bone-building calcium and Vitamin D you need. Weight-bearing exercise, such as walking, yoga and lifting light weights will create forces on the bone that trigger increased bone density, which is beneficial.

9. Moderation! Minimize the intense "weekend warrior" sports or housework activities.

If you work hard Monday through Friday, do not declare "war" on your back by doing intense exercise or household chores on the weekend. You're likely to end up calling in sick in on Monday because of painful muscle strain. Your best bet to stay healthy and pain-free is to pace yourself throughout the week on your chores and exercise. A regular regimen of stretching, strengthening and aerobic conditioning is better for your back than a single burst of intense exercise.