

Back Care for Drivers

- ◆ Adjust your car seat to provide the best possible support for your back
- ◆ Take regular breaks, move around in your seat and think 'posture'
- ◆ Avoid twisting when getting in or out of a vehicle
- ◆ Never lift heavy things after a long drive – loosen up first!

Driving needn't be a pain in the back . . .

Confined in a fixed position for hours on end, stressed out by traffic and with the constant vibrations of wheels on the road, it's not surprising so many people get backache after a long drive. Work, leisure and driving all contribute to wear and tear of your back over the years. Two out of three adults will experience severe back pain at some time in their lives and for half of us the pain won't go away quickly. But there are things that we can all do to avoid back problems or to reduce existing discomfort.

Why should you take regular breaks from driving?

- ◆ It's not just your legs that need a break from driving; walking gets the circulation flowing in your back as well. The discs do not have their own blood supply, but rely upon regular movement of the spine for the supply of nutrients. To reduce the risk of lower back pain, avoid sitting still for lengthy periods and take regular exercise breaks.
- ◆ When you stop at motorway services or a supermarket, park as far from the entrance as possible so that you get the chance of a short exercising walk.
- ◆ Take frequent breaks, especially when on a long journey. A few minutes now and then can prevent time off with a painful back later. Even if you have paperwork to catch up with, don't just sit in the car, make sure that you get out and walk around for a couple of minutes first.

Is there a way of getting in and out of your vehicle that is better for your back?

- ◆ With the steering wheel and pedals in the way, getting in and out of your car can be difficult. Try to avoid twisting when getting out of the car - turn your whole body towards the door; lower your feet to the ground. Then stand up.
- ◆ Again try to avoid any twisting when getting into the car - sit on the edge of the seat first and then rotate your whole body into position.
- ◆ If there is very restricted space in your vehicle, it may be helpful to slide the seat backwards to provide more room for getting in and out.
- ◆ When driving a particularly high vehicle, such as some 4 x 4's, vans, trucks or tractors, always use the footstep to climb down from the vehicle. It may seem quicker to jump down, but the repeated impact can be very damaging to the spine.

Are you sitting comfortably?

- ◆ Car seats usually feel comfortable when you first sit in them but after a lengthy period of travelling, significant discomfort and even back pain may be experienced. Many car seats do not provide adequate support and can cause strain to be placed upon the bones, muscles, discs and ligaments of the back.
- ◆ Any lack of support is even more serious if you have a previous back injury or are suffering from muscular back strain. Good, supportive seating can help to reduce

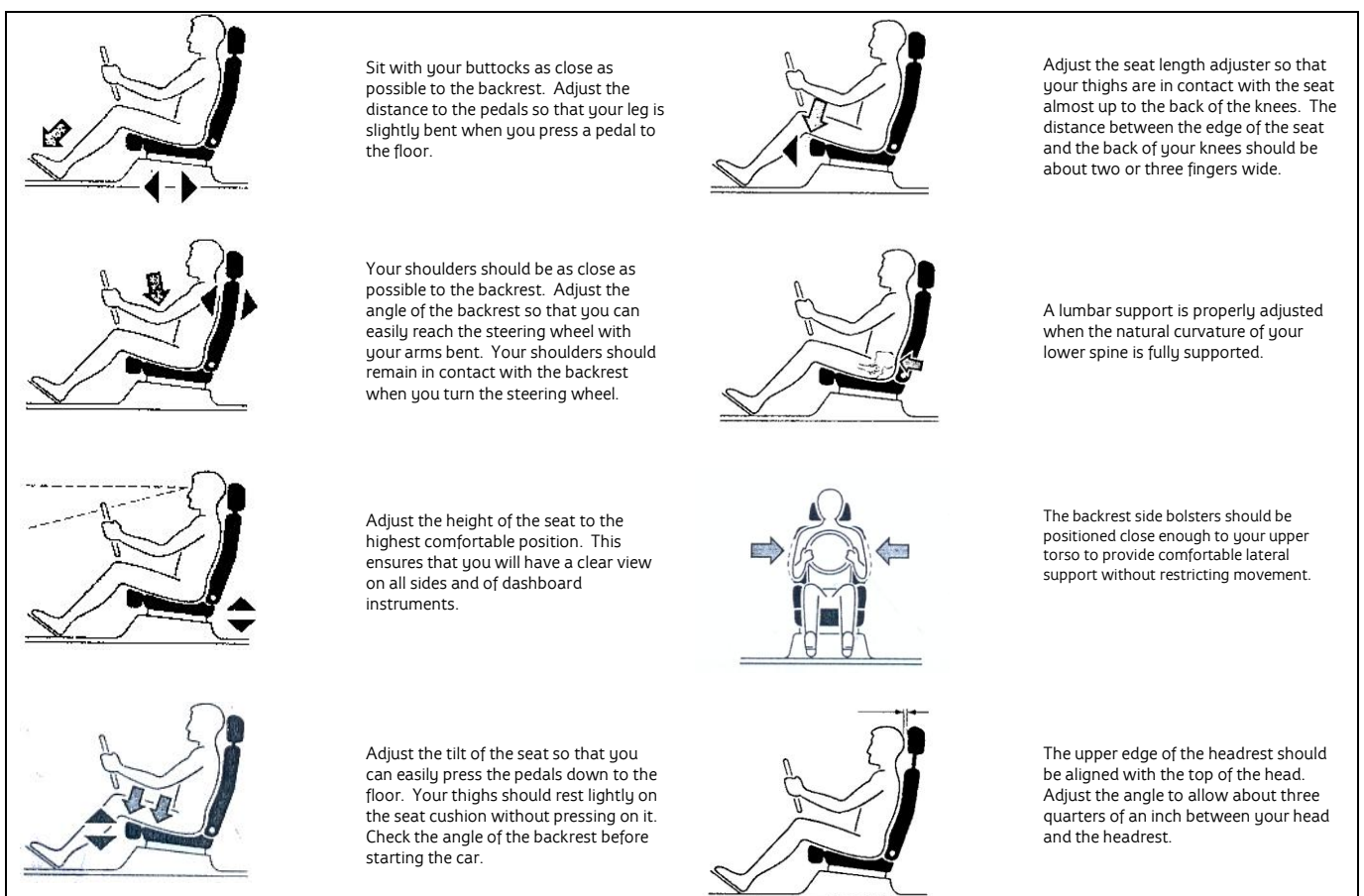
discomfort, and may also prevent postural backache from occurring in the first place. If you feel that your seat is not giving good support, try a rolled up towel or lumbar roll in the small of your back.

- ◆ Providing adequate support to the back whilst travelling is important for passengers as well as drivers. Most of the following points are equally useful for passengers.

What should you do whilst driving?

- ◆ Think about your posture: keep your chin in, don't grip the wheel too tightly as this tenses your muscles and adds to stress, relax your shoulders and keep your head upright. When you stop at lights or are stuck in a traffic jam, try these simple exercises to relieve muscle tension:
- ◆ Pull in your stomach muscles, breathe out forcefully, relax and repeat.
- ◆ Raise your shoulders towards your ears, push the shoulders backwards against the seat, relax and repeat.

Sitting correctly is this easy



What should you do when loading or unloading items from your vehicle?

If you've just spent several hours on the road and your back muscles are stiff, one of the worst things you could do is lift something heavy! Even lifting small items in and out of a car boot can be bad for your back as the combination of high boot sills or bumpers and restricted access can produce awkward back postures that make the back vulnerable to injury.

- ◆ Before lifting, stand upright, place your hands in the small of your back and arch backwards a few times.
- ◆ The golden rule when lifting anything is to bend your knees, not your back.
- ◆ Turn using your whole body - don't twist.
- ◆ Carry objects close to the body and don't try to carry everything in one go!
- ◆ If something is particularly heavy for you, get someone to help you lift it.
- ◆ If you need something from the back seat, don't twist and reach for it. It is far better to walk around to the back door and lift it out.
- ◆ Van and lorry drivers should always minimise the need for lifting by using any tail lift or mechanical handling equipment provided. Also, special care must be taken after a long period of driving when opening rear doors, lifting roller shutters and releasing levers. Remember to bend your knees, not your back, if any levers are positioned low down on the vehicle.

Relevant Information

BackCare Booklets – Active Back Care; Managing Back Pain

Other – 'Take the Pain Out of Driving' (leaflet) – Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

www.csp.org.uk

NHS Direct on whiplash <http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/articles/article.aspx?ArticleId=395#>