



Back and head support
When driving, it is important that your back and head are adequately supported.

The car seat

The cushioning of a car seat must not slope towards the middle or too much weight will be borne by the pelvic bones instead of the thighs. The seat must be firm enough to resist the indirect forces you experience when using the pedals. If the seat is too hard, engine vibration is transmitted up to the spine, which can cause back problems.

The pedals

The pedals should not be too stiff (especially the clutch), too high off the floor or set to one side of the driver. If you are a woman of small or average height, the foot controls may be too far apart or incorrectly angled for your feet; the strain of operating them, particularly in heavy town traffic, can lead to back pain.

The backrest

The backrest of a driver's seat should give good support to the lower back, both lengthways and sideways. Most car seats now have an adjustable lumbar bar which you can position to suit your back. Alternatively, buy cushions for the lower back which can be attached to the backrest by a strap. If you can, alter the angle of the backrest to an optimum of between five and ten degrees behind the vertical. For people, such as airline pilots, who sit in a seat for long periods, specially moulded backrests can prevent back pain.

The headrest

You should be able to rest your head comfortably on the headrest, relaxing your neck and shoulder muscles, while still looking straight ahead. The headrest should be slightly padded, and adjustable both up and down, and forwards and backwards. The top of the headrest should be at least level with your brow at all times to effectively reduce whiplash strain (see p. 46).

Lying down

Many back sufferers find they are most comfortable lying down. When you lie down, you relieve your spine of much of your body's weight; this reduces the compression on a protruding disc, for example. But you don't have to lie flat: try the positions on pages 66–67 until you find the most restful one.

Your bed

If your back pain is worst in the morning, you may need to change your bed, especially if this is the only time your back aches or if this waking pain has developed only since you bought a new bed. But often aching and stiffness results from inactivity, and it may not matter which surface you lie on.

Any finely sprung mattress which supports you will do – make sure it is at least 15cm (6in) longer than you, to allow freedom of movement. Stick to what is most comfortable for you – you know best of all whether your bed is harming your back. A good mattress should be firm and provide contours for your body.

A bed base that sags or has lost its spring can harm your back. Adjustable beds are increasingly available and affordable. They can raise the legs or the head to any angle. You can also set it for the Fowler position (see p. 66).

POSITIONS TO LIE IN

Lying on your front increases the curve in the lower back and this will aggravate backache that is caused by facet joint problems. However, such a position will probably not hurt your back if your pain is caused by a prolapsed disc. See also Resting your Spine, pages 66–67.



Foetal position
Some people find that lying down in the foetal position brings them the most comfort and welcome relief from the pain in their back.

For most people, lying flat on their backs with their legs straight out also tends to increase the curve in the lower back and cause backache. The Fowler position, with your legs supported so that your knees are bent, helps to flatten out the excessive curve and also relaxes the psoas muscles,

Pillows

To test how good your pillow is, lift it horizontally, with the edge of your hand running across the centre. If the pillow stays more or less level, all is well. If it sags, buy a new one.

If you often wake up with a stiff neck, try a pillow twisted into a butterfly shape or use a rolled and twisted towel to act as a soft collar. Or try a specially designed neck support pillow (right). These support your neck and prevent your head lolling from side to side.

Neck support pillow

This pillow is ridged at the front to hold the neck and head firmly and put a very mild traction on the neck. It is divided into three sections – the two sides are slightly higher to support your head properly when you are lying on your side.

