

*Peggy Hall's*

HEAL  
your  
back



Eliminate  
back pain  
and start  
feeling  
better  
right away

**HEAL** your **back**

# Heal Your Back

**By Peggy Hall**

**As surfers, we need our bodies to be fit and healthy so we can surf loose, strong and free. Because we demand so much of our bodies, it's no wonder that we may occasionally (or chronically!) experience a sore back. Here's what to do to experience relief.**

**It's not just surfing that stresses the back** -- our everyday habits greatly influence our back health as well. You may not realize it, but how you sit, stand, sleep, move, walk, eat, drink and even think all have an impact on your overall health, including the condition of your back. But if you make some simple adjustments, you can greatly improve not only the health of your back but of your general well-being as well.

## How You Sit, Stand and Walk

When you sit, stand and walk, make sure your spine is straight, with your shoulders lined up right over your hips. (You'll find detailed instruction on correct posture in the Yoga for Surfers DVDs. In yoga, perfect posture is called "Mountain Pose" or "tadasana".)

### **Mountain Pose:**

Stand with your feet pointing straight ahead. Line up your ankles so they're right under your hip bones. (Your feet will be three or four inches apart.) Turn your heels out slightly so the edges of your feet create a straight line – but not so much so you feel pigeon-toed. Take your feet farther apart if need to be comfort.

Now rock back and forth a bit until you feel your weight evenly distributed in both feet. Make sure your feet are not rolling inwardly or outwardly – either of these extremes will throw your back out of whack.

Next, bend your knees a tiny bit so the backs of your legs aren't locked out. Try to keep your knees lined up over your ankles.

Draw energy up your legs by activating your thighs. In other words, feel like you're pressing off the ground rather than sinking into it. It's a different perspective, isn't it?

Take your awareness to your hips and pelvis and make sure that your hips bones are pointing straight ahead. Avoid letting your pelvis tip up or down. Also think about the pelvis being level side to side so one hip isn't higher than the other or one hip bone isn't forward of the other.

Now draw your belly button gently in and reach your rib cage up off your hip bones. L-e-n-g-t-h-e-n through your spine, as if the crown of your head is reaching toward the sky.

Roll your shoulders back and down and gently squeeze your shoulder blades together. Turn your thumbs away from you so your palms face front, or simply clasp your elbows behind your back to further open your chest and shoulders. This action frees up your ribcage to open your lungs for better breathing.

Line up the back of your head right over your upper back. Keep your chin parallel to the ground. Think about keeping your sternum (breastbone) in line with your belly button – so you're not puffing out your chest like a military general – everything is aligned.

Now breathe. Try to release any tension in the position. Close your eyes and soften into it a bit and allow the alignment to be absorbed and integrated at a cellular level. Let this position feel natural, effortless, yet conscious.

This is “Mountain Pose” -- the position you want to come back to again and again, when you're standing, walking, working, sitting at your desk or sitting on your surfboard. **Be sure to sit tall on your surfboard between sets. Not only will that help to strengthen and protect your back, but it will give you more energy as well, since you'll be breathing more freely!**

Perfect posture takes energy to maintain but it also creates energy by allowing the free flow of oxygen into your lungs. In Mountain Pose, your body is aligned the way it was designed. Posture in and of itself can make the difference between health and illness, fitness or injury. Remember to breathe slowly, easily, consciously, enjoyably!

## How You Move

**Be sure to take breaks** when you've been sitting or standing for more than 45 minutes at a time. You can walk around a bit – or (my favorite) – stand with your feet wide apart and swing your arms from side to side, twisting through your torso. (There's an example of this at the beginning of Yoga for Board Sports.)

You can also simply bend your knees, fold forward and rest your chest on your thighs. Another good way to stretch you back is by squatting: turn your toes out a bit and drop your hips down. (See an example of this in Yoga for Surfers I.)

**While surfing**, you can relax your back by holding onto your board and dangling your legs in the water. Bend your knees and move them from side to side to release your back. And before and after every surf session, stretch your back by hugging your knees into your chest. You can do this in a seated position, lying on your back, or in “child's pose” where you press your hips back over your heels.

**When sitting at a desk**, use one of those inflatable exercise balls instead of a regular office chair. This change alone healed my sciatica. Bonus: you'll strengthen your abs and back at the same time you're improving your posture.

**When you're lifting heavy items**, be sure to bend at your knees – not your waist – so you can use the strength of your legs to support you.

**Avoid carrying bags over one shoulder** (ladies, use a handbag instead of a shoulder strap for your purse). Instead, use a backpack (over both shoulders) or balance yourself by carrying bags of equal weight in each hand.

**If you're hauling a boardbag** through the airport, for example, carry it by the handle instead of the shoulder strap. If you have a longboard or multiple boards, get a boardbag with wheels or ask someone to carry one end for you!

## Correcting Muscular Imbalances

You may think that the pain in your back is strictly a problem with your back, but there are many other factors that can contribute to back pain.

**Tight hips and tight hamstrings** can cause back pain by pulling the spine out of alignment. One of the best ways to stretch the front of your hips (called the hip flexors or ilio-psoas) is by doing a kneeling lunge. You can stretch the outer hip and glutes by doing variations of pigeon pose. Yoga for Surfers I and Yoga for Board Sports both include demonstrations of lunges and pigeon poses.

The hamstrings are the muscles that run down the back of the thigh. There are three hamstring muscles and they all need to be stretched adequately. Standing forward folds or seated forward folds work well, as do standing poses like triangle and half-moon. There are several variations in the different Yoga for Surfers DVDs. Always move with caution and care when you're stretching your hamstrings. In this case, "less is more". You want to allow the muscles to open gradually – so never force or strain or you'll simply create more tension in the muscle. Remember to breathe and move at your own pace.

**Weak abdominal muscles** also contribute to back pain. You see, your "abs" are there to serve as a corset, keeping all of your internal organs in place. When your abdominal muscles are weak, gravity pulls everything forward and places undue stress on your spine.

But don't get carried away doing situps – those can cause more harm than good if done incorrectly. Instead, develop stronger abdominal muscles by doing a variety of "functional moves" that mimic actions we need to do in everyday life.

Right now, for example, sit tall in Mountain Pose (did you forget it already?) relax your shoulders and breathe consciously. Every time you exhale, gently draw your belly button in against your spine. Gently. Don't force or strain. As you inhale, let your abdomen relax so your entire torso can expand as you breathe in. Exhale and squeeze your belly button in.

What you're doing is activating the transverse abdominis, the deepest layer of the abdominal muscles. The transverse abdominis runs horizontally across your belly, serving as the deepest and strongest layer of muscle. Still not sure where it is? Place your hand on your belly and cough a few times. You'll feel it contract.

Now when you perform all of the poses in Yoga for Surfers, be sure to contract your abdominal muscles on each exhalation. That alone is going to increase your muscular strength and support.

Yoga for Surfers includes a variety of "core" strengtheners, which target the abdominal muscles and the back. Work at your own pace and put your mind into the poses as well to deepen the benefits.

## What You Wear on Your Feet

That's right – shoes! The type of shoes you wear has a huge impact on the health of your back.

Protect your back by wearing a thick enough sole to provide shock between you and the pavement. Sorry to say, but that means no ultra-thin beach sandal or slippahs. Now, walking barefoot on the sand is a fine idea to exercise your toes, arches, feet and ankles. There's a natural amount of give in soft sand. But when it comes to the asphalt pavement, get a good pair of shoes that offer some protection.

If you live in a house with hardwood floors, tile, stone or other hard surfaces, the same advice applies. Wear a pair of thick-soled slippers or use anti-fatigue mats in certain areas where you do a lots of standing, like in the kitchen.

Replace worn tennis shoes that no longer offer support. Women, stretch your calf muscles thoroughly after wearing high heels – or better yet, avoid any shoes that are higher than 3 inches. And choose a platform style with a stacked heel for more comfort and better back health.

## What You Eat

What you eat has a huge impact on how you feel. There are foods that cause us to feel sluggish, bloated and achy...and foods that make us feel fabulous. Start paying attention to what you eat and how it makes you feel and you'll figure it out for yourself. But for now...

**Eat foods that help reduce inflammation** and soreness such as fresh fruits and vegetables, lean proteins and raw, unsalted nuts and seeds. Superstars like pineapple, strawberries, bananas, apples, cucumber, celery, romaine lettuce, avocado, walnuts, flaxseeds, olive oil and salmon are some of the best choices when it comes to anti-inflammatory foods.

**Foods that cause inflammation** and thus exacerbate your pain include milk, cheese and other dairy products (yogurt is okay), refined sugar (fruits are fine), flour, packaged, processed foods, alcohol, caffeine, red meat, foods high in sodium like soy sauce, packaged salad dressings, packaged or canned soups, frozen entrees, any low-carb or sugar-free processed foods that contain artificial sweeteners and other harmful chemicals.

**Drink up to three liters of water** every day (get free wellness tips at [www.PeggyHall.com](http://www.PeggyHall.com) for more ideas on how to incorporate those healthy lifestyle changes) to help hydrate tissues and ease discomfort.

**If you'd like to try supplements**, excellent choices include Vitamin D, Vitamin C, omega-3 fatty acids (found in ground flaxseed meal) and a blend of liquid calcium-magnesium. Magnesium is the “relaxing” mineral that helps to calm muscle, bone and nerve pain. Read more about magnesium in the articles section at [www.PeggyHall.com](http://www.PeggyHall.com).

## How You Sleep

Sleeping on your stomach can cause a flair-up of back pain, so try sleeping on your side or on your back.

**When you sleep on your side**, place a pillow under your knees and another one under your top arm. So if you're sleeping on your right side, for example, place a small pillow under your left elbow. This will help prevent strain on your neck and shoulder.

**When you sleep on your back**, place a firm pillow, bolster or even a rolled up blanket under your knees. This will take the strain off your back and allow for a more restful sleep. I also like to use small pillows under each elbow in this position, again to prevent any neck and shoulder strain.

**Top tip:** when you get out of bed in the morning, try this move to avoid straining your neck or back: roll to face the side of the bed and then push yourself up from the side using the strength of your arms and your core. Don't pull with your head or neck. You'll see some examples of this in the Yoga for Surfers DVDs.

**Make sure your mattress** is neither too soft or too hard – you may need to replace it if it's more than 10 years old. I've also heard of people who have healed their back simply by replacing their waterbed with a real mattress.

**Also, consider the condition of your pillow.** Ideally, when you sleep your head is aligned with your neck and spine. Avoid pillows that are too soft or stacked too high. Experiment and see what works best for you.

## What You Think

**Your body and mind are really one entity.** What you think affects how you feel. If you are angry at your back for causing you pain, you are actually delaying your healing! Instead, forgive yourself and your back for any discomfort. Send some healing kindness, understanding and compassion to yourself and your back. Do this as you're breathing consciously.

**Visualize your back as being healthy and strong.** See yourself surfing with power, grace and ease, free from any pain or discomfort. If mind-body healing is a new approach for you, please be open to it. Many people have experienced relief through deep relaxation. This works on a physical level of allowing the muscles, ligaments and the very tissues themselves to release pain and tension – and it works on an emotional level by also releasing pent-up feelings that may be contributing to back pain.

**From a yogic perspective,** the physical area of the back is related to different emotional areas. **Your lower back** corresponds to creativity, inspiration and passion. Is there something in these areas that needs to be expressed? Or perhaps you're overdoing it in those arenas. The key is to find balance.

**Your mid back** is related to personal power, goal-setting, seeking and finding your dreams. Are you stifling yourself in that area? Or, are you obsessed with personal power and achieving your goals –at all costs? Again, strive for balance.

**Your upper back** is related to emotions of love, hope, peace, gratitude – or the shadow emotions of grief, heartbreak, jealousy, envy. When you open and balance the motions of your heart, upper back pain and disappear almost magically. The idea is to allow yourself to express these emotions and to tend to them where needed.

**Bottom Line:** Your body responds physically to emotional feelings. So choose your emotions consciously. Feeling frustrated over your back pain and injuries actually causes your body to release chemicals that delay healing. Instead, smile right now, give thanks for the blessings you enjoy – and for the blessings yet to come. Thank your back for all it has done for you!

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## What about Pain Relievers?

You might be tempted – or even told by your doctor – to take aspirin, Tylenol, Advil, Motrin or other pain relievers to help get rid of back pain. And yes – in an acute situation those pills can be helpful – in the short term only – for bringing down the inflammation and easing the pain.

But when you use those drugs for weeks or months at a time, you're setting yourself up for even more problems down the line. In the first place, if you haven't eliminated the cause of your back pain (like those I mentioned earlier: posture, movement, muscular imbalances, shoes, bed, food, etc.) you're simply treating the symptoms and not the root cause. You'll be dependent on those pain pills for months and even years to come.

**A far greater concern** is the deleterious effects those drugs are having on you. All drugs must be broken down by the liver. (That's why doctors insist you get your liver enzymes tested before extending your prescription.) Your kidneys also have to flush away the excess chemical residue. Doesn't sound too good, does it? Stomach problems, elevated blood pressure and ulcers have also been linked to prolonged use of pain medications. Please – I don't want to see you suffer!

**Alternative remedies** include massage therapy, acupuncture, chiropractic treatments and of course – yoga.

## **S.O.S – For Immediate Relief**

If you're in acute pain, do not attempt to exercise or do any yoga. Instead, rest a while and allow the twinges to subside. Learn to listen to those messages your body is sending you. Most of us can tell when something is “coming on” – so don't push it.

**My favorite way to eliminate a low-back spasm** is to lie face down with a pillow or two under your hips bones. Place another small pillow or rolled up towel under your shins for more comfort. In this position, your tailbone is the highest point. All pressure should be off your spine now, with gravity helping. Bend your elbows and rest the side of your face on your hands, or rest your arms at your sides. You can apply a bag of frozen peas or ice (never on bare skin) to your lower back. Stay here and relax for 10 minutes. You can repeat this a few times during the day as needed.

**Another excellent way to ease a back spasm** is to lie on the floor with your legs resting on the back of a chair. Make any adjustments so you feel comfortable.

You can also try this by lying on the floor and draping your legs over the edge of your bed. Use a pillow under your hips if need be to adjust for the height of your bed. Now with your right hand, press the tips of your right thumb, middle finger and pinky finger together. With your left hand, touch the tips of your index finger and thumb together. These finger positions – or “mudras” in yoga – activate areas in your brain that will promote rest and healing. Hold these positions but allow your hands to rest comfortably at the sides of your body. Breathe and relax, allowing your back to release.

If you have stiff or fatigued back (as opposed to having a spasm) you’ll do better by getting some gentle movement. Do those torso swings from Yoga for Board Sports or the cat stretches that are demonstrated in each of the DVDs.

Walking everyday will also help to stretch and strengthen your back at the same time.

**NEVER force or strain.** If you feel those twinges coming on, rest and use the tools I’ve share with you here. Most of all, breathe ~ relax ~ focus and enjoy!!

Peggy Hall is not a medical doctor and the information she presents is for educational and informational purposes only and is not intended to diagnose or cure any condition. Please check with your doctor before beginning this or any health program.

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