

Back Talk

Back injury is an occupational hazard of parenthood.

How to lift tots up

without pain? Read on.

Here's a scene repeated millions of times a day: You just finished work and you're picking your baby up from the sitter. You've been stuck behind a computer all day. You're stiff and tired. As you reach in to put your child in the car seat—*zap!*—your back heaves in acute pain.

When it comes to parenting, back injury is an occupational hazard. New mothers, whose backs have just endured the stresses of pregnancy and birth, are particularly vulnerable. So are taller fathers and mothers who must bend farther than others to scoop up tots.

And think about this: When you place a baby in a car seat, you often break every rule of back health by holding the child at arm's length while bending and twisting.

Then there's another problem: Kids that weigh as much as a large sack of flour won't sit still.

"If a child jumps into your arms and you're not expecting it, your risk for injury is greater because you aren't thinking about your movements," says rehabilitation engineer Gerald Weisman, assistant director of the Vermont Rehabilitation Engineering Center at the University of Vermont.

With more people in their 30s and 40s having children, the likelihood of preexisting "wear and tear" on the

spine also sets the stage for problems. New parents are especially at risk because they often are not used to the physical rigors, says Helen Horstmann, M.D., associate professor of orthopedic surgery at the Medical College of Pennsylvania and Hahnemann University in Philadelphia. "More than lower back pain, parents tend to feel the strain in the area between their shoulders."

If a parent has been sitting all day at work or doing physical tasks, she will be even more prone to backaches over the changing table later. "The pain comes from bending over and doing repetitive activities—lifting and placing the baby in a crib, highchair or playpen," says Dr. Horstmann, who has six children herself.

The fatigue that goes along with 2 a.m. feedings likewise contributes to injury, says Sheila Reid, a physical therapist at the Spine Institute of New England. "When parents are a lot more tired than usual, their muscles don't respond the same way. And the advice to take it easy for a few days is not applicable for mothers."

For men and women, age is not nearly as important as fitness in determining the risk of injury, Mr. Weisman says. "It's a fallacy that the spine is fragile. If you stay as fit as you can, avoid awkward or extreme postures and hold heavy weight as close to your body as possible, you can avoid most problems." ●

7 RULES FOR PREVENTING INJURIES

Four out of five Americans suffer a back injury during their lives. These rules for preventing back injury apply to everyone:

- 1** Bend at the knees, never from the waist
- 2** Pivot, don't twist, when turning
- 3** Hold a child or load as close to the body as possible
- 4** Exercise regularly
- 5** Get up to stretch at least every hour if sitting, or reach for your toes when standing
- 6** Lose extra weight, which stresses the spine
- 7** Avoid wearing heels over 1.5 inches

PREGNANCY: A ONE-TWO PUNCH



Pregnancy may seem like the perfect reason to let an exercise regimen slip. Not so. As many as 82 percent of expectant mothers have back pain primarily due to hormonal changes, which make their ligaments looser.

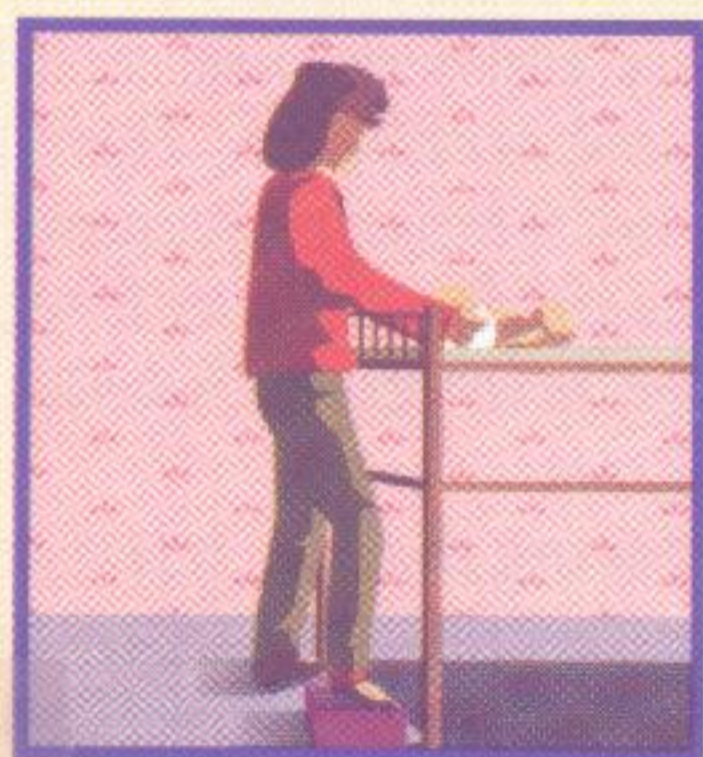
Add to this the pressure of the baby on the spine and you have the perfect recipe for injury.

Without exercise, a woman increases the chance of back pain after birth, because the abdominal muscles supporting her spine are out of shape. Pregnant women should, of course, consult with their doctors about the best exercise.

Once the baby is born, Dr. Horstmann advises new mothers to spare their backs. "Let a sibling, father or neighbor hold the baby. If you anticipate walking for a while, use a stroller rather than carrying the child."

LIFT THEM WITH CAUTION

When you're taking care of a baby, there are any number of occasions where lifting is required. Here are some tips for picking up your child with a minimum of strain in these situations:



▲ CHANGING TABLE

Use a changing table higher than your waist to minimize bending. For added support, put one foot up on a rail, stool or bottom drawer while you bend.

▲ CAR SEAT

Minimize the reach by putting the seat closer to the window. Brace yourself by placing one knee on the seat. On long trips, loosen up by walking around a few minutes before lifting the child out.



▲ STROLLER

Kneel or squat when lifting your baby from a stroller. Use your legs and avoid rounding your back or twisting. Buy a stroller with a handle long enough to reach without leaning over.



▲ CRIB

Lower the crib side; don't bend over it. Get as close to the baby as possible, bend at the waist and keep your back straight and firm as you lift.

▲ PLAYPEN

Coax your child to come to the side of the playpen. Then bend your knees, keep your back straight and avoid twisting.

▲ NURSING

Use pillows to bring the baby up to you and a foot stool to support your legs. Or lie down when nursing, if possible.



▲ CARRYING

If using a backpack or a "frontpack," alternate between them to avoid overstrain. Or prop the baby on your hip with her legs around you. ●