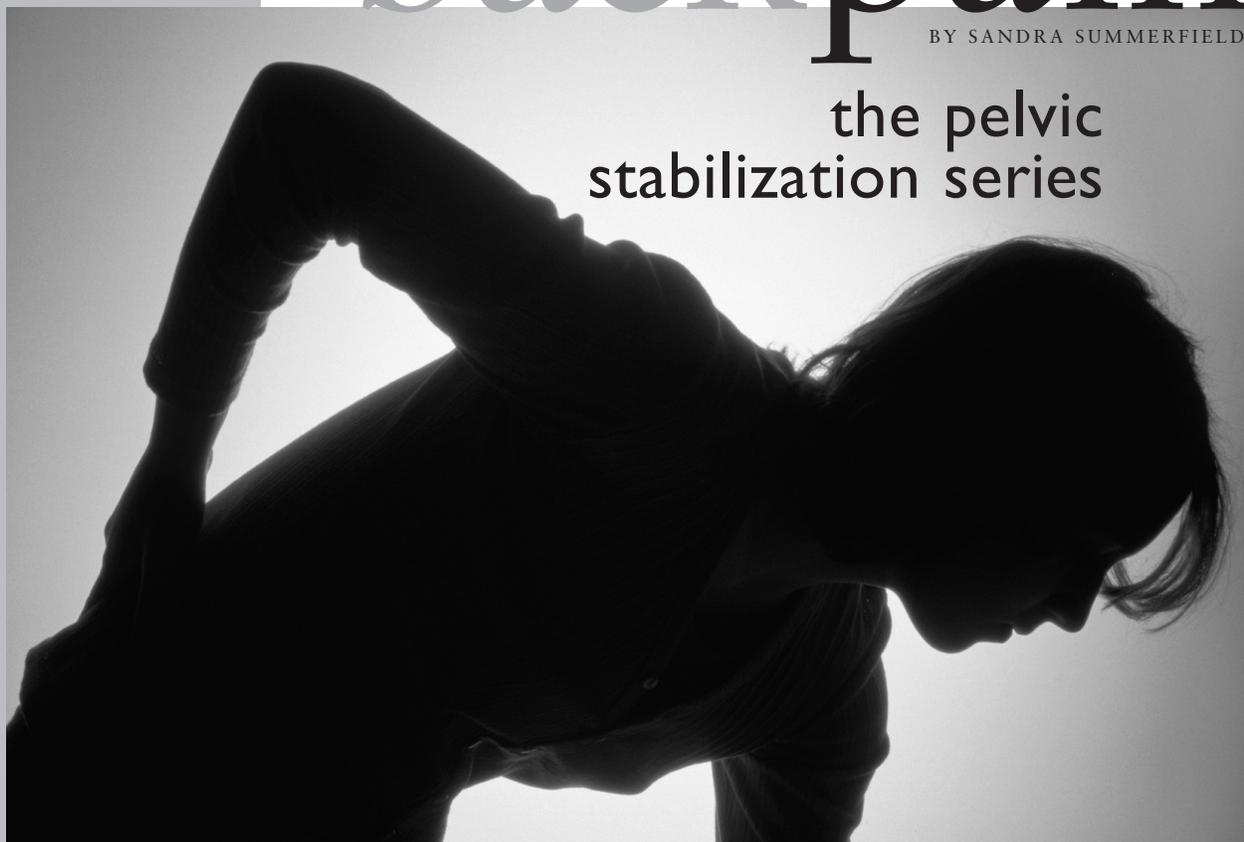


banish backpain

BY SANDRA SUMMERFIELD KOZAK

the pelvic
stabilization series



Next to the old-fashioned head cold, back pain is the most common ailment around.

It runs the gamut from a lingering sensation of discomfort to eye watering spasms that stop us in our tracks. Whether mild or acute, back pain strikes almost everyone at one time or another. In fact, many of us have day-to-day discomfort without recognizing it as a form of back trouble. The people I see in my yoga workshops and back-care programs often say they don't really have a back problem,

A number of factors may be causing or contributing to your back pain. The possibilities include sleeping on a worn-out mattress, sitting for long periods without proper back support, and putting your back in a rounded forward (or flexed) position.

“It’s just that my back is hurting right now.” But when I start asking questions (Do you experience back discomfort once a month? More than once a month? How long does it last? How often is your back really comfortable?), they realize their back hurts often and begin to see they have learned how to ignore much of their discomfort. Or they discover that because the pain is intermittent, they forget about it once it goes.

Or they try to ignore it because they think they can’t change it.

But it can be changed. I say this with conviction because I had chronic back pain for a long time. As an experienced yoga teacher, I sought help from a variety of senior teachers and investigated the problem on my own for many years. All to no avail. I had thought the pain was the result of an old injury, but eventually I discovered it was the result of a muscular imbalance and I realized I had to stabilize my pelvis. I did that by combining my yoga training, my years of back investigation, and the information I gleaned from physical therapists and physicians. After a few weeks of work, my back was pain-free for the first time in years. It was glorious. And the remedy was so simple. I named it the Pelvic Stabilization Series and began sharing it with others. It worked—and in a surprisingly short time. The rehab physicians and nurses attending my back-care workshops were so taken with their own immediate results that they began prescribing it to their patients, with great success.

Imbalance and fire

There are several major muscle groups that need to work together to hold the pelvis stable: the abdominal

muscles, the lower back muscles (front, sides, and back), the adductors (inner thighs), and the quadriceps and hamstrings (front and back of the thighs). Each of these muscle groups needs to be flexible, but at the same time each needs to be strong enough to hold the pelvis secure and stable.

For example, weak abdominal muscles can permit a lordotic condition (excessive curvature in the lower spine), which can lead to discomfort or chronic pain. When you strengthen the abdominal muscles, you are also strengthening all the muscles in the front and sides of the spine, which is why abdominal strengthening is a key to maintaining a healthy back. But strong abdominals are not enough.

There also needs to be a balance between strength and flexibility within and among muscles groups. For example, when the hamstrings are extremely flexible but their strength has not been maintained, they lose some of their ability to stabilize the pelvis.

The Pelvic Stabilization Series creates strength and balance in and among the muscles that brace and stabilize the lower back. As you will see, these exercises are simple and easy. If you practice them regularly, you will notice a marked (and possibly dramatic) improvement in anywhere from two days to two weeks. There is a catch, however: you must stop doing whatever it is you do to create or perpetuate the pain. In other words, you have to eliminate or at least reduce the discomfort or pain in your back. I call this “putting out the fire.”

A number of factors may be causing or contributing to your back pain. The possibilities include sleeping on a worn-out mattress, sitting for long periods without proper back support, and putting your back in a rounded forward (or flexed) position. Strangely enough, frequent and often unconscious maneuvering to find a pain-free position also adds fuel to the fire. While these frequent mini-

stretches may feel better for a moment or two, they are actually contributing to the inflammation. To heal your back, you need to rid yourself of these conditions and habits.

If you practice yoga asana, it is a good idea to stop doing forward bends until your back is pain-free. Why? Because rounded-back forward bends aggravate most back conditions, and you may not know whether or not you are rounding your back when you bend forward. Many students are certain they are doing their forward bends with a straight back when in fact they are not, which is why I suggest eliminating all forward bending until the fire is out.

One last word about fire: take care not to create any more as you work with this Pelvic Stabilization Series. If at any time you come to the point of discomfort (or worse, pain), back off immediately. Make the movement smaller and more stable and try again.

And remember, yoga is about internal reference and self-discovery. Try on this series as you would a new shirt. You put the shirt on, see how it looks, feels, and fits before deciding whether or not to buy it. Do the same thing with this practice. Try it on your own body until you can see it clearly—which will take approximately two to four weeks. Then judge for yourself whether or not to make it part of your daily routine.

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The pelvic stabilization series

This series has three parts: finding neutral, increasing blood flow, and stabilizing the pelvis. Finding neutral establishes a safe and stable position for your pelvis; increasing blood flow facilitates healing; and the pelvic stabilizers create muscular strength and

balance.

Finding Neutral

A neutral lower back is neither flexed nor extended—it is a lengthened position of the natural lumbar curve in the body. In neutral, all the vertebrae are stacked and balanced, and there is no disk compression. The following exercise for finding neutral is designed to put out the fire and keep it out. Neutral is a good position in which to hold your injured back all the time—standing, sitting, walking, and resting.

in neutral. Lie on your back with knees bent and feet on the floor near the buttocks. The feet are parallel and the shinbones are perpendicular to the floor. This is the foundation position for most of the exercises in this series. Relax and become aware of the weight of gravity in the abdomen. Feel heaviness in the abdominal organs, bones, and muscles. Allow this heaviness to relax the entire abdomen and lower back toward the floor. With each inhalation, relax and do nothing. With each exhalation, feel the weight of gravity in the belly and the spine lengthening until it touches the floor lightly at the waist. The feet are strongly connected to the floor.

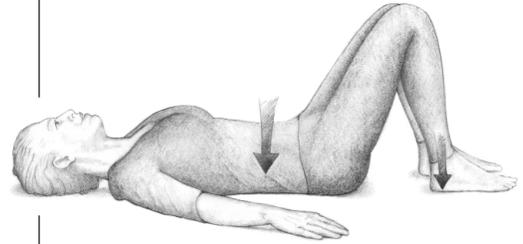
Create an easy motion with the breath. Exhale—let the spine lengthen organically toward the floor. Inhale—release and relax the back completely. This is similar to a pelvic tilt, except that this movement is slow and conscious and you focus on lengthening the coccyx toward the heels. I like to describe it in terms of the lower back lightly “kissing” the floor—lengthening down gently and releasing naturally to the force of gravity.

Do this movement 20 times. Relax completely for a minute. Then do it 20 more (20 x 2).

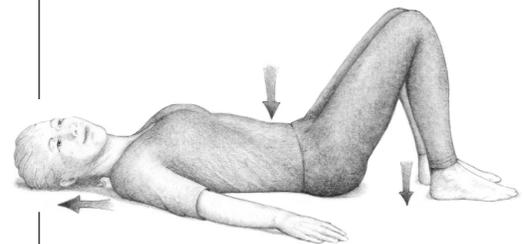
The Blood Flow Series

To help the body begin to heal itself, you need to enhance the blood flow around and through the injured area. This nourishes the muscles and tissues and carries away toxins. The three blood flow movements given here cover the entire back, from the first cervical vertebrae to the last sacral vertebrae. It is important to do them every two hours for the first two weeks. If you are experiencing chronic pain, continue until the pain is gone.

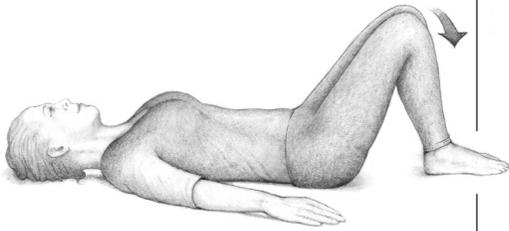
I. head turns. Holding your back in neutral with the lower back kissing the floor, move the head gently from side to side. It is important to keep this movement small—four to six inches to each side is plenty. Move slowly. This simple movement soothes the upper spine and increases the flow of blood to the area. Do it 25 times; rest for a minute and repeat (25 x 2).



Keep the abdomen moving down and the feet grounded.



Keep the lower back in neutral, the neck long, and the movement small.



Keep the lower back in neutral and the hips firmly on the floor.



Stand with the back in neutral and let the arms hang loose as you roll the shoulders.

2. knee turns. Holding a neutral spine, bring the legs together so the knees and feet are touching. Keeping the knees together, move them approximately six inches to the right, back to center, then six inches to the left. If you feel any pain, reduce the range of motion until it vanishes. Keep the motion slow and smooth, and repeat it 25 times to each side; rest a minute and do 25 more (25 x 2).

3. shoulder rolls. Standing up straight, roll the shoulders backward in a circle: up, back, and down. After 25 repetitions, rest one minute and repeat (25 x 2). If at any time you feel discomfort or pain in the back or neck, back off and reduce the movement until you are stopping short of the point where the pain begins.

We are focusing on this backward movement to open the chest and lengthen the diaphragm. Often our shoulders are rounded forward by the shape of our chairs, sofas, and car seats; these backward shoulder rolls help restore balance.

If performed every two hours, these three easy movements—head and knee turns and shoulder rolls—can make significant changes to your body. In the past few years I have come to appreciate the great benefit of small movements; there's often more yoga to be found in them than in the more dramatic asanas.

pelvic stabilizers • After you have found neutral, have learned to hold it steady, and have increased the healing flow of blood, you can begin to strengthen the major muscles that will safely support and brace your back. These movements allow your back to heal and will ward off future injury. This series will be effective if practiced once a day—every day—in the beginning. After your discomfort has disappeared and life is good, then you will want to practice three or more times a week.

These six movements are learned most easily in the order given. However, after your body has memorized them (it will take at least several days) you may want to change the order. Feel free to do so, but be sure to do a full round of one movement before going on to the next.

And remember: if you touch the pain, back off. Make sure your back is actually holding neutral, and your position is correct, and then reduce the size of the movement, always staying just this side of discomfort.

Lie down again, put your back in neutral, and let's begin.

1. marching down. Your one-pointed concentration (*dharana*) is on holding your neutral pelvis perfectly still as you very slowly lift your right foot two inches off the floor. Under no circumstances should you let your pelvis move—not even a millimeter. Slowly lower the right foot to touch the floor. Then lift your left foot two inches off the floor and place it down again, slowly and carefully. To help you determine if your hips are moving, place your hands on your front hipbones.

Do 10 repetitions, rest, and do 10 more (10 x 2). (Don't cheat—one repetition involves both feet.) Over time, when you're ready, increase to 20 repetitions each round.

2. up/down half-bridge. Your entire allegiance is to holding the lower back in neutral all the time. With your arms at your sides, palms down, lift the hips straight up off the floor into half-bridge. (We're not moving into complete bridge because we don't want to involve the upper back.) Take care not to roll and unroll the spine—you do not want to round your back but rather lift your neutral spine straight up and bring it straight down.

Keep your breath strongly connected to the movement—exhaling as you lift and inhaling as you lower. The feet are solidly connected to the floor and the knees always remain directly over the feet. After 20 times, rest one minute and repeat (20 x 2).

3. knee press. Hold neutral as you lift your spine again into half-bridge and hold it. Your knees are over your heels. Now as you exhale, squeeze your knees together. Imagine there is a pencil between them and squeeze it for a second or two. Release the knees back to their original position (over the heels—no wider). Keep your breath strongly connected to the movement, exhaling as you squeeze the knees and inhaling as you open them. Be sure to hold the tailbone up, letting the belly sink into the pelvis. Squeeze and release 20 times. Rest a minute and repeat once more (20 x 2).

4. marching up. Now return to the marching movement but with your hips up in neutral half-bridge position. Your tailbone is up and your focus is on keeping the hips absolutely still. March as before, lifting one foot two inches off the floor and carefully placing it down again before repeating the movement on the other side.

Do 10 repetitions (or as many as you can manage without moving the hips). Rest and do 10 more (10 x 2).

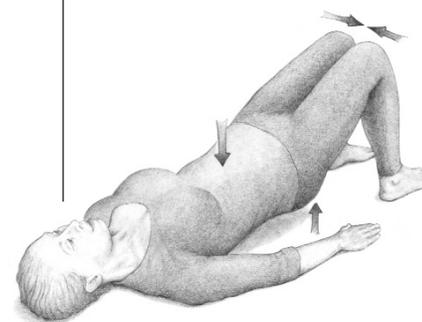
This movement requires strength and practice. In all the years I've been teaching the Pelvic Stabilization Series, I have encountered only one person who could do this without moving the hips on the first try, although many believed they could. Many students can't do this movement at all in the beginning. If this is the case for you, don't strain to do it: keep doing the other exercises in the series, and this one will eventually come to you.



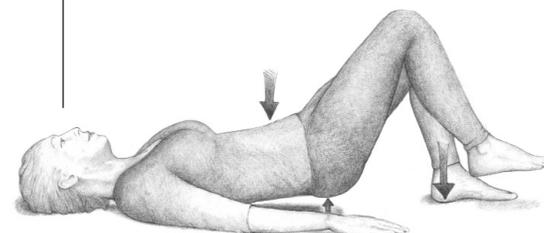
Maintain a neutral spine and hold the pelvis absolutely still as you lift each foot.



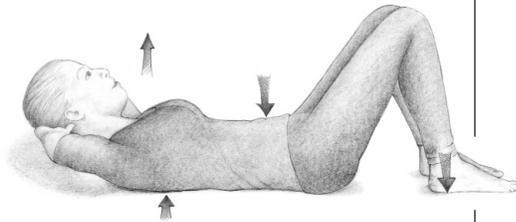
Take care not to round the back as you raise and lower the hips.



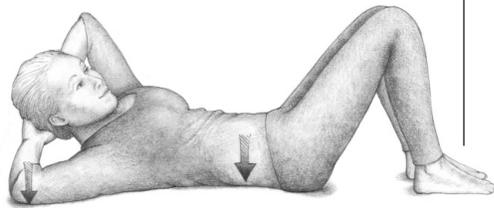
Keep the tailbone up and the spine in neutral as you squeeze with your knees.



When you have stabilized the hips in neutral, try placing the hands on the hips to help eliminate movement in the pelvis.



The lift comes from behind the shoulders. Lift straight up—avoid rounding the back and pulling the chin to the chest.



Keep the armpit open and the back in neutral. The lift comes from the shoulder blade. The opposite arm is glued to the floor.

5. two abdominal strengtheners. There are a number of exercises for strengthening the abdominal muscles. These two are the best for achieving the results we want because they work the abdominals without working other large muscle groups. Both are done with the back in neutral and with your hands interlocked behind your head, keeping the elbows wide open.

1. As you exhale, bring the head, arms, and shoulders straight up toward the ceiling by lifting from behind the shoulders. Focus on the quality of the movement, not on how high you can go. Rather than rounding the back and pulling the chin to the chest, try lifting straight up, initiating movement under the shoulders. Inhale as you return the head, neck, shoulders, and arms to the floor. Repeat 25 times to complete one round.

2. Next we are going to lift alternate shoulders. Imagine that your right upper arm and elbow are glued to the floor. Lifting from behind the left scapula and keeping the left arm wide open, move the left shoulder up in the direction of the right hip. Bring yourself back to the floor. Glue the left elbow now and lift from the right shoulder up and to the left. Both sides constitute one repetition; 25 repetitions make a round.

Alternate between these two abdominal strengtheners until you have completed 8 rounds of each (200 repetitions) or until you are completely wasted. Keep in mind that strength is your objective here. So push your limits and do as much as you can, remembering to stop short of creating injury.

A seasoned teacher can be helpful in this or any practice, giving you feedback on your alignment and assessing your body's muscular balance. When there is discomfort or worse, it is definitely time for a private lesson to address specific needs. Find the best teacher you can: someone who knows bodies and therapy, someone in whom you have confidence and with whom you resonate well. See them privately at least once or twice a year. The student-teacher connection is invaluable for keeping us on the right track.

You can do this Pelvic Stabilization Series simply as exercises and you will get a good result. Or you can do it as a yoga practice, being mindful of the breath, mind, and body. The practice of yoga can be found in anything we do. It's all in the approach we use and our fineness of focus. ●

When you strengthen the abdominal muscles, you are also strengthening all the muscles in the front and sides of the spine, which is why abdominal strengthening is a key to maintaining a healthy back.