

Back pain a serious business

by Claire Shield, Northside Physiotherapy

It might be easy for those who work in the fishing industry to dismiss pain in the lower back that comes and goes, but it can be a serious business.

Evidence shows that once you have an acute episode of low back pain there is an 86% recurrence rate within 12 months. Addressing the underlying muscle weakness of the deepest layer of abdominal musculature will reduce your recurrence rate, whatever the initial cause.

What causes low back pain?

The main causes of low back pain in the fishing industry are likely to be:

- prolonged bending;
- heavy lifting;
- exposure to cold and wet conditions;
- working on unstable surfaces;
- trauma from slipping; and
- getting into awkward positions.

These in turn may cause muscle strains, ligament strains, disc problems or sciatica. By following some simple advice on strengthening the muscles of your lower back and the abdominal muscles in your trunk, it will reduce your likelihood of injury.

Your abdominal muscles

The abdominal muscles are made up of several layers. The outermost superficial layers consist of the 'six pack' and oblique muscles, which are powerful and designed for movement such as twisting, turning and flexing of the trunk.

The deepest layer of abdominal muscle is called the transversus abdominis and this muscle wraps around the abdominal contents and acts like a corset to draw in your lower abdomen. This increases the intra-abdominal

pressure, contributing to stabilising your spine. The transversus abdominis is often referred to as the 'core stabiliser'.

To activate this stabiliser, imagine you are putting on a pair of trousers that are just a little too tight around your lower tummy. Breathe in, out, pause a moment, and while in pause, slowly and gently draw in your lower tummy as you would to help do up the button on your trousers. Hold this tension for 5-10 seconds while resuming a normal breathing pattern. Try this exercise when you are lying down, sitting up or standing. The more you practice gently holding in your lower abdomen, the more stable your spine will be.

It is important that you consciously activate your transversus abdominis every time you perform any movements that involve the trunk or limbs. Every time you squat down, pick up an object, reach out, or carry something heavy, draw in your lower abdomen beforehand to stabilise your spine, protecting it from damaging forces. If under heavy load, your larger outer muscles should come into action to help perform the activity.

Too late! Self help

If you are in acute low back pain, the best thing to do is to remain active by trying to gently walk around on level ground. Try to avoid forward bending, prolonged sitting and heavy lifting. If you are unable to continue walking, try laying on your stomach and applying a heat pack or some form of warmth to the lower back. It is advisable to seek professional help from your physiotherapist.



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