

Your Back Isn't FRAGILE, You're Just WEAK

It seems like it is a law on par with those of Poe and Godwin that the comment sections of content related to physical activity will eventually contain comments about how someone's spine is going to snap. It does not matter what the subject of the video is doing, if they are exerting themselves in any capacity someone is eventually going to decide that it's dangerous for their back. Picking up a jug of water and putting it on a shelf? "Better check that lumbar flexion." Touching your toes? "I can feel my back snapping." Barbell curls? "You are cheating, and also ouch my back hurts just watching". A deadlift? "Welcome to Snap City". An Atlas Stone ? "Enjoy your wheelchair". It is literally on every. single. video. that has reached a sufficient number of views and comments. No matter what you do, someone, somewhere, is so excruciatingly weak and terrified of physical activity that they believe their precious vertebrae are at risk just watching other people actually move. Why is this? Where has this notion that the spine is a ticking time bomb made of balsa wood and craft paste come from?

Let's get something out of the way right from the start. Your back is made to bend, even under heavy loads. Google a picture of the human spine. Notice that it's made of a bunch of vertebrae instead of a single bone sheath? This makes the spine capable of articulation. Now Google a picture of the muscles in the back. See how many there are? Those, in conjunction with all your other non-spinal bones, support your spine as you bend and twist and move. And if those muscles are big and strong you can do all of that even under progressively heavier loads. You want to know how many times I have hurt my spine lifting heavy objects over the last decade? Zero. Want to know how many times I have even hurt the musculature around my spine doing all the excessively rounded movements like Atlas Stones, Extreme Deficit Deadlifts, Zercher's, or anything else midwits in the comment section can't comprehend? Zero. Look, if I can pull 600lbs from a position where my shoulders start well below my hips, then you can certainly get away with someday deadlifting with a back that isn't perfectly neutral. I honestly don't understand how people can see every other part of the body get stronger and support higher loads and be totally fine with it but somehow the spine and the muscles of your back are incapable of this feat.

Does this mean your back is incapable of sustaining injury? Obviously not, people hurt their backs all the time. But the cause is not because the spine is inherently fragile, it is because people are weak. Now this is not a very charitable thing to say but it is very true. The general population sits in their office chairs all day, then sits in their car, then sits on their couch. They allow all the musculature surrounding the spine to atrophy into stringy jerky. These muscles are what support your spine, if they are weak and inactive that support is diminished. You will exist in a state of poor posture where all of the interconnected parts in your lower back and hips are out of whack and that will cause pain and discomfort, and that is just passive. When you actively put stress on your back that your musculature cannot handle you are going to have even more issues. And what does the average person do when they hurt their back, or anything else for that matter? They rest, because they don't want to put more 'strain' on the injured area. This makes the area weaker, which makes it more likely to become injured again. And the cycle repeats. This same pattern plays out with the more active crowd. They get into the gym, and are

inundated with fear mongering about the fragility of the spine and how you MUST take care to avoid loading it. You have to keep that perfectly neutral (or even worse straight) back when doing any kind of squat or deadlift, right? Well that person is almost certainly going to have musculature suited for day to day life, but they are not going to have the musculature suited for their heavy lifts. At some point they are going to fail to maintain the technique that keeps the spine perfectly neutral. This will result in an injury, which will lead to rest and a redoubled effort to keep the back undertrained. Which will lead to more weakness and then more injuries, and then...well you get the idea.

I think a lot of you are aware of how to actually use your back and are actively working on strengthening it already, but for those that are newer or have been avoiding anything but strictly neutral back work until now here is how to begin gaining the strength needed to have a highly functional and resilient back.

The first thing you should work on is shifting your focus from what the curve of your spine looks like when lifting to whether it is strong and 'comfortable'. I'm going to describe most of this through the lens of deadlifting, because it's a lift many people train and learning to use your back is very applicable to it, but the ideas apply to any lift. When setting up for a deadlift, do not try to keep your back 'neutral', certainly do not try to make it straight. As you set up, take some extra time when pulling the slack out of the bar, see what configuration your torso wants to go to. It probably wants to round a little bit in the upper back, let it. An exercise you can try to work on this is to load a bar with far more than you can lift, or secure it at starting height in some other manner, and practice pulling out the slack and bracing against that immovable weight. See where your body ends up when it tries to set itself up to lift something it cannot move, and try to emulate that when setting up for your regular pulls.

Once you have learned to stop fighting your body's natural inclinations, and you are letting your back adopt its desired configuration, you can begin to actively push farther. For deadlift in particular, learning to maintain a strong, properly braced torso while rounding forward is very helpful. If you can lower your shoulders at the start of the lift, you can raise your hips a roughly equivalent distance. This gives you a stronger starting position, letting you move more weight off the floor, which is the most common sticking point.

As an aside, I want to make a note here that how much you should round is a balancing act. Even if you can hold your torso in an extremely rounded position, it might not let you lift the most. The rounding will make you stronger off the floor, but make it harder to pass the knees and then lock out. You can think of the rounding as borrowing some power from the second half of the lift to bolster the first half. Some rounding is usually good, because your lockout is stronger than your breaking the floor (generally), but too much and you will get the weight off the ground, but you will probably fail to get it past your knees, or at least to lock it out. You need to find out how much rounding is the right balance between power off the floor and power at lockout.

Anyways, you can slowly start to actively add this rounding intentionally, but always make sure that you are prioritizing a strong, fully braced torso. Your goal should be having a roundED back, not a roundING back. You should largely be aiming for a static back in your deadlifts, not a moving one.

Beyond just integrating this idea into your standard lifts, you can begin to work on movement patterns that actively challenge your backs ability to hold more extreme configurations or change configuration while under load. Things like Zercher Deadlifts and Jefferson Curls will both build the muscles needed to achieve these goals and teach you how to properly use them. If in doubt, start these kinds of things light, but I do not personally think you need to start them from extremely light weights if you have a solid foundation of back musculature and bodily awareness when it comes to holding braces and moving your back under load. Find a weight that you can move while maintaining the cardinal rule of having a torso that feels strong and comfortable. Personally, I started these kinds of movements with very heavy loads, and while some other areas of my body were not necessarily 100% ready, my back was fine. But I have had years of practice with using my back and some very powerful muscles from my regular deadlifts. Chances are you do not have these things, so don't try to jump directly to extremely heavy weights. If a lot of these guidelines sound like the same guidelines you would apply to any other part of your body/movement, you are correct. That is because training your back isn't any different than training the rest of your body. It's still just muscles connected to bones like anywhere else.

I want to really hammer in the idea that weakness born of disuse is going to be more likely to cause you issues with your back than 'overuse'. You are not guaranteed to never have a significant issue in your back from performing lifts that load it heavily, but the same can be said of any other body part. Severe injuries happen. Lifting is a very low risk physical activity, relative to almost every other option out there, but is it not risk free and neither are these kinds of movements. That said, I still think that you are far more likely to run into issues due to having a weak, unprepared back than you are from an injury sustained while lifting 'with your spine'. "Strong people are harder to kill than weak people, and more useful in general" might be the only reasonable thing that Mark Rippetoe ever said about anything, but he was right on the money at least that one time. Learning to use your back, instead of being afraid of moving it, will make you both stronger and more resilient to injury. You will not only develop the musculature needed to support and protect your spine, but you will learn how to use it in a manner that maintains a strongly braced torso when life or lifting inevitably throws a situation at you that necessitates it. Living in fear of that event will only ensure that you are unprepared to meet it. So really it is up to you, do you want to be the person who comments "Ouch my back" while in pain from just sitting around, or do you want to be the person that can comfortably Zercher Deadlift hundreds of pounds? I already know who I want to be.

