

**"The greatest contribution ever made to non-surgical back pain treatment."**

— Helen Barkan, M.D., PH.D., Neurology, MAYO CLINIC

# **8 STEPS to a PAIN-FREE BACK**



*Remember When It Didn't Hurt<sup>SM</sup>*

**Esther Gokhale, L.Ac.**

with SUSAN ADAMS

**“An extraordinary  
application of ancient  
wisdom to solve modern  
back problems.”**

LUCA CAVALLI-SFORZA

Professor Emeritus of Genetics, School of Medicine  
Stanford University, author of *The History and  
Geography of Human Genes*



**Esther Gokhale** (Go-clay) has been involved in integrative therapies all her life. As a young girl growing up in India, she helped her mother, a registered nurse, treat abandoned babies waiting to be adopted. This early interest led her to study biochemistry at Harvard and Princeton and, later, acupuncture at the San Francisco School of Oriental Medicine. After crippling back pain during her first pregnancy and unsuccessful back surgery, she began her lifelong crusade to find a solution to back pain. Her studies at the Aplomb Institute in Paris and years of research in Burkina Faso, India, Portugal, and elsewhere led to her development of the Gokhale Method<sup>SM</sup>, which she has been teaching at her Palo Alto wellness center for the past fifteen years.

Visit her on-line at [gokhalemethod.com](http://gokhalemethod.com)

Email her at [esthergokhale@gokhalemethod.com](mailto:esthergokhale@gokhalemethod.com)

Nearly 90% of American adults suffer from back pain, and the number continues to climb. Why does this condition affect so many people in the industrialized world, while in some countries only 5% of adults report back pain?

In a quest to find the root cause of back pain, Esther Gokhale studied at the Aplomb Institute in Paris and traveled to parts of the world where back pain is virtually unknown. Her research took her to remote Burkina Faso, rural Portugal, and fishing villages in Brazil. What she learned in each of these places has changed the lives of thousands of people. Preserved in the movements of weavers, millers, and farmers in more traditional societies is ancient body wisdom that prevents pain and enhances health.

For the first time, these insights have been brought together in a step-by-step guide designed to help those suffering from back pain re-educate their bodies and regain the posture for which our bodies evolved.

## 8 Steps to a Pain-Free Back.

Natural posture solutions for pain in the back, neck, shoulder, hip, knee, and foot.

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Though the steps in 8 Steps to a Pain-Free Back are best done in order, the material in Chapter 5 can be helpful on its own. The general idea is to use a subset of your abdominal muscles to elongate your spine without distorting its shape.

# 5

## USING YOUR INNER CORSET

*Using your muscles to protect and lengthen your spine*

*My son reaches up for a toy. Notice that his abdominal muscles are engaged to help him elongate his torso to better reach the toy, his back is not swayed, and his head turns so that his eyes remain on a plane perpendicular to his body.*





In the lessons so far, you have learned several effective ways to lengthen and protect your spine:

- Using an external object like a back rest or bed to put your spine in traction
- Positioning your pelvis so the vertebrae stack above it without tightening and shortening the surrounding muscles
- Breathing with the muscles around the spine relaxed, to further lengthen the spine with each inhalation

In this lesson you will learn a more powerful technique that gives you added length, is available to you at all times, and provides strong support to protect your elongated spine. The technique involves contracting certain muscles in your abdomen and back to make an “inner corset.” This contraction causes the torso to become narrower and taller, thus lengthening the spine (fig.5-1).

fig.5-1



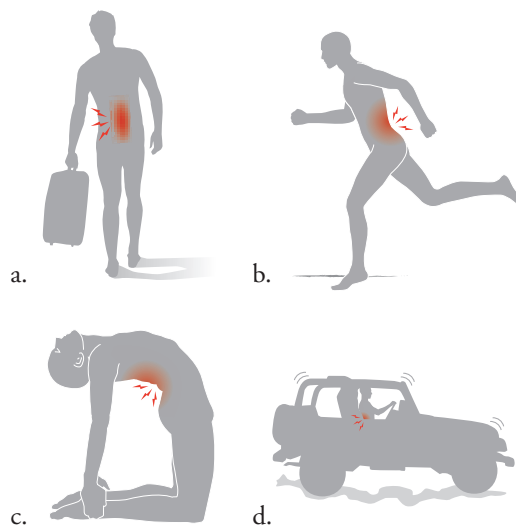
*The muscles of the inner corset include the intrinsic back muscles and the abdominal obliques.*

The inner corset is important in situations where your discs may be challenged, such as:

- Carrying a heavy back pack, suit-case, or other object (fig.5-2a)
- Running, jogging, or engaging in other high-impact aerobic activities (fig.5-2b)
- Playing almost any sport – tennis, volleyball, basketball, or even swimming
- Performing Yoga poses that involve twists, side-bends, or backbends (fig.5-2c)
- Dancing in a way that involves impact, spinal twisting, or bending
- Riding on a bumpy road in a vehicle with poor shock absorbers, riding a mountain bike, or sailing in rough seas (fig.5-2d)

When an African or Indian village woman carries a heavy weight on her head (fig.5-3), she is not

fig.5-2



*Activities where not using your inner corset can result in damage.*

fig.5-3



(Burkina Faso)



(India)



(Burkina Faso)



(Burkina Faso)

*These women are actively using their inner corsets to elongate and protect their spines as they carry substantial weights on their heads.*



passive under that weight, which would cause her discs to compress. Rather, she actively engages her inner corset; her torso becomes more slender and her spine becomes longer. In this way she protects her discs from the weight she carries. Periodically, when carrying a burden for a long time, she may lift the burden above her head with outstretched arms (fig.5-4). This action stretches her back muscles and re-engages her inner corset.

Medical literature documents that in certain populations, such as the Bhil tribe of Central India, the discs of a 50-year-old look very similar

to those of a 20-year-old (fig.5-5).<sup>[29]</sup> The proper and frequent use of the inner corset muscles is perhaps why these populations experience virtually no disc degeneration as they age. In our culture, on the other hand, it is considered normal to have significant disc degeneration by age 50. By using our muscles to protect our discs as the Bhils do, we can avoid the deterioration and damage that we have erroneously come to accept as normal.

In the Gokhale Method<sup>SM</sup>, as in conventional approaches, there is an emphasis on using and strengthening the abdominal muscles. In our culture, when people use their abdominal

fig.5-4

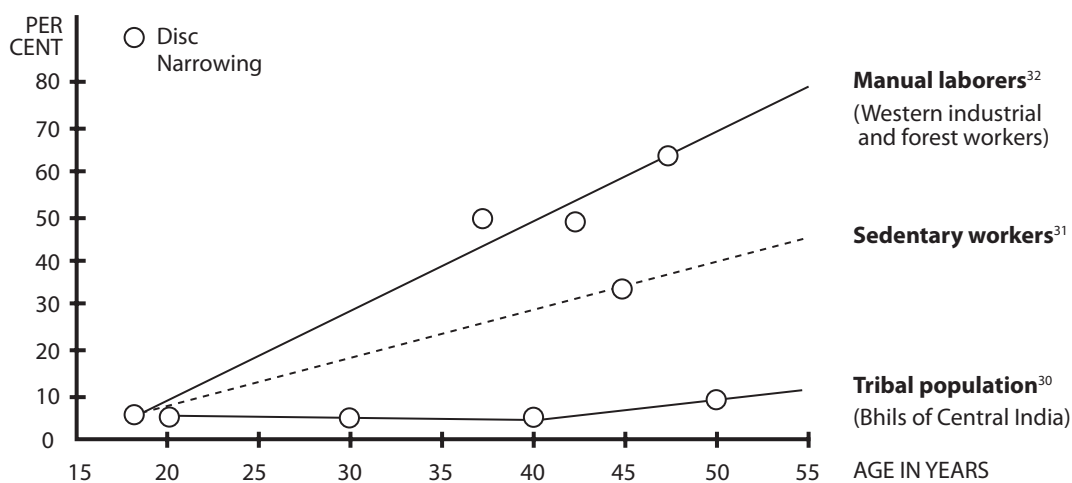


*It is common among people who carry weights on their heads to stretch their back muscles and re-engage their inner corsets periodically.*



*Placing laundry basket on head (Burkina Faso)*

fig.5-5



*This graph<sup>[30]</sup> shows a large difference in disc narrowing with age in three different populations. There is very little disc narrowing in the Bhil tribal people of Central India,<sup>[29]</sup> more disc narrowing among Western sedentary workers,<sup>[30]</sup> and high levels of disc narrowing among Western industrial and forestry workers.<sup>[31]</sup>*

musculature, they tend to use all their abdominals at once, tucking their pelvis and hunching their shoulders in the process (fig.5-6a). The result can be unhealthy posture (fig.5-6b).

fig.5-6



*a. Many common abdominal exercises involve tucking the pelvis and rounding the shoulders inappropriately.*



*b. Doing conventional abdominal exercises may result in long-term unhealthy posture changes.*

In this lesson you will learn to isolate the abdominal *oblique* and *transversus* muscles from the *rectus abdominis* muscles so that you can lengthen and support your spine without distorting it. Learning this can be challenging, especially for some highly trained athletes who must overcome firmly ingrained habits to isolate the action of the different abdominal muscles.

The best way to strengthen and maintain these muscles is to use them in the course of daily activities. When you are first learning to use your abdominals in this new way, try to exercise your inner corset up to 20 times a day for a minute each time. This will help you establish the new pattern and reach a threshold level of muscle strength. It will also give your long back (*erector spinae*) muscles a periodic stretch and your discs a periodic decompression.

When you have integrated this new pattern into your daily life, you will find that many activities traditionally considered harmful for the back are actually healthy challenges for the muscles of your inner corset.

## BENEFITS

- Stretches your spine more reliably and with a stronger action than any other technique
- Stabilizes your spine in case of injury
- Protects your spine in actions that involve compression, impact, or distortion
- Provides a stable platform enhancing the power of arm and leg actions
- Improves the tone and appearance of your torso

*Until I met Esther Gokhale, I had lost hope in finding relief for my constant pain caused by a severe, multi-level back injury. I had spent years working with numerous physicians and physical therapists, received a number of cortisone injections, tried virtually every available prescription anti-inflammatory medication, and endured painful diagnostic and therapeutic procedures to curb significant pain and avoid surgery. I was convinced I had explored every treatment option, but I hadn't. Upon receiving independent endorsements of Esther's technique from trusted friends, I decided to see her for pain relief.*

*Initially I resented her advice to revisit the way I positioned and moved my body. I felt betrayed because I had faithfully followed my prescribed physical therapy and home exercise regime. Nevertheless, I was taught and slowly relearned how to sit, stand, walk, and even lie down.*

*I found and strengthened areas I didn't even know needed attention. With Esther's guidance, I worked out in new ways. Friends started telling me I looked great. Thank you, Esther, for relief from pain and a new awareness of my body.*

Patti Fry  
Menlo Park, CA





*Carrying baby on back African-style*



*Gladiator sculpture (19th century, France)*



*Yoga-like fantasy pose (19th century, France)*



*Watering crops (Burkina Faso)*



*Wrestling game (Burkina Faso)*

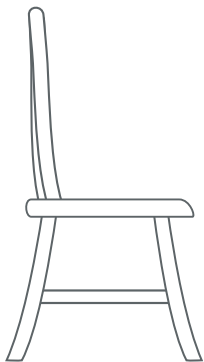
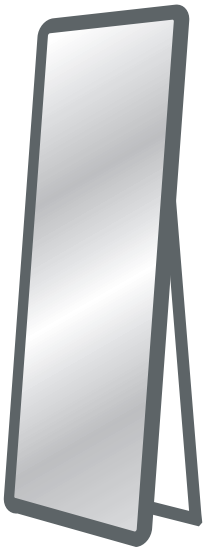


*Carrying baby, bucket, and tub (Burkina Faso)*

## EQUIPMENT

*You will need the following:*

- A full-length mirror
- A chair with a firm seat
- A wedge



# 1

 STACKSIT IN PROFILE TO THE MIRROR


It is important to start with a healthy passive sitting position before engaging your inner corset.

# 2

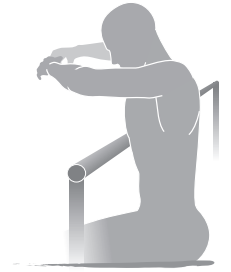
 PLACE THE FINGERTIPS OF YOUR LEFT HAND SO THEY CAN MONITOR YOUR SPINAL GROOVE


Use a light touch to check the entire low back. Ideally, you will have an even groove (see pages 77 and 133).

**3** WITH YOUR RIGHT HAND, REACH UPWARD AND A LITTLE FORWARD, AS THOUGH YOU WERE REACHING FOR THE TOP OF A HIGH CABINET



Try to find the direction of stretch that gives you length in your back rather than your front. Using feedback from your fingertips, maintain your spinal groove. It may help to imagine you are reaching up and over a bar at chest height.



*Imagine reaching up and over a bar at chest height to help engage the inner corset muscles correctly.*



*The lean abdominal area of a greyhound provides a useful image to help you engage your inner corset.*

**4** REACH UP WITH YOUR LEFT HAND. KEEP YOUR ARMS PARALLEL AND STRETCH UPWARD AS FAR AS YOU CAN



Become aware of the muscles in your abdomen. Engage them so that your abdomen feels sleeker than usual. The outline of your ribcage may become prominent, like that of a greyhound.



A common mistake is to sway the back while reaching upward.

**EXAMPLE OF ENGAGING THE INNER CORSET WHILE REACHING UP**



*(Burkina Faso)*



## USING THE INNER CORSET TO PROTECT SPINAL STRUCTURES



*Preparing to pull up (Brazil)*



*Hunting with a spear (Tanzania)*



*Hanging wares in stall (Brazil)*



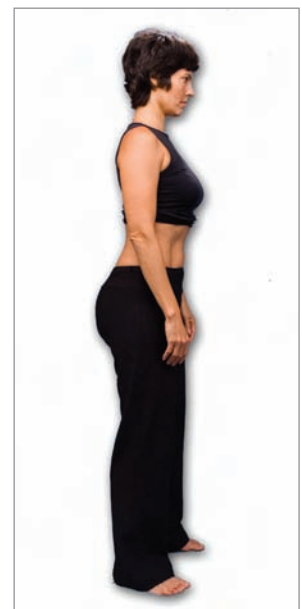
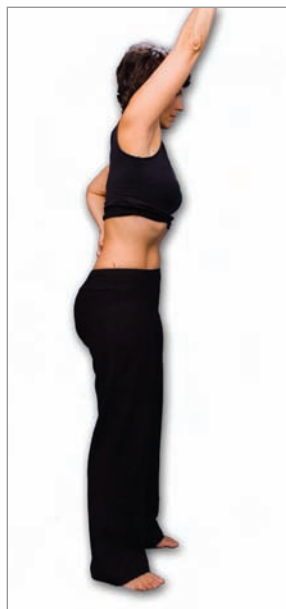
*A coat rack provides a useful image to help you maintain a stable torso while relaxing your shoulders and arms.*

## 5 SLOWLY LOWER YOUR ARMS AND RELAX YOUR SHOULDERS



The goal is to restore your arms and shoulders to a relaxed position while maintaining all the abdominal support you established in the previous step.

## 6 REPEAT STEPS 2-5 WHILE STANDING



As before, be careful to lengthen rather than arch or round the back. It is difficult to isolate the inner abdominal muscles. You may find, as many beginners do, that when you relax your arms and shoulders, your abdominal muscles relax too. If so, start again and proceed with care. Imagine that you are a coat rack: The spine is the sturdy, tall central support and the shoulder girdle is a coat hanging from it.



## 7 PRACTICE MAINTAINING THIS INNER CORSET AS YOU MOVE



You may feel a bit like a marionette; the torso is relatively still and stable, while the limbs are available for movement.

## 8 PRACTICE RELAXING AND ENGAGING THE INNER CORSET MUSCLES REPEATEDLY

With time and practice you will no longer need to use your arms to find this action. Your body will learn to do it very quickly when needed.

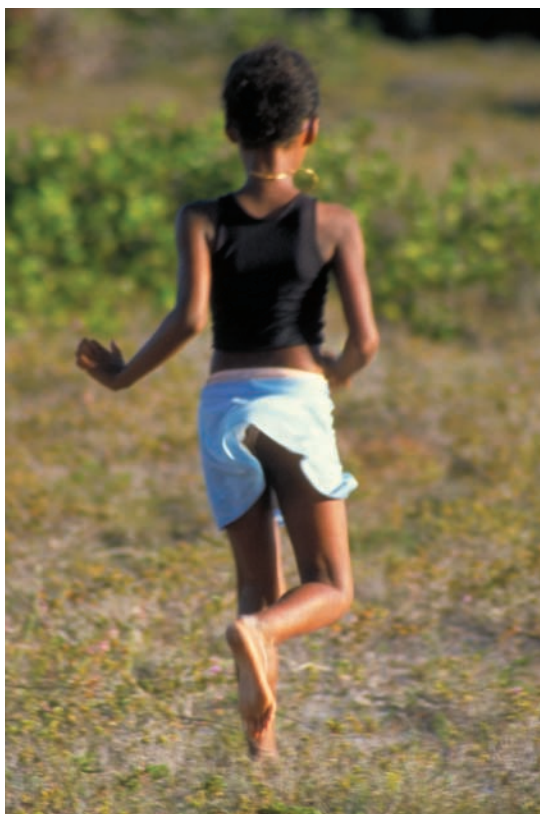
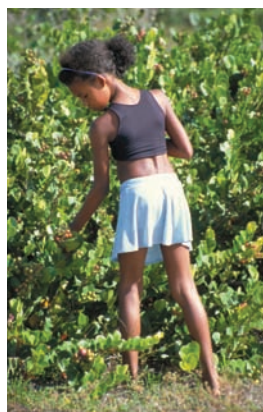
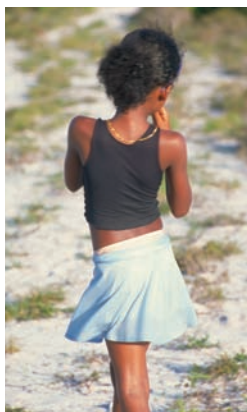


*Imagine you are a marionette or doll with a stable torso and freely-moving limbs.*

EXAMPLE OF MOVING THE LIMBS WHILE KEEPING THE TORSO TALL AND STABLE



*Grinding millet  
(Burkina Faso)*

**EXAMPLES OF ENGAGING  
THE INNER CORSET:****ENJOYING  
YOUTHFUL  
ACTIVITIES**  
*(Brazil)***PERFORMING  
MANUAL LABOR**  
*(Brazil)*



"PLAYING" CAPOEIRA,  
A CHALLENGING MARTIAL ART  
(Brazil)



## INDICATIONS OF IMPROVEMENT

Using the inner corset can be difficult to learn because your abdominal muscles may not be strong, you may not be used to isolating them, and the long muscles of your back (*erector spinae*) may resist the action. With practice, as your inner corset muscles get stronger, and as your long back muscles become more limber, the pattern will be easier to maintain. You will also no longer need the raised arm action to engage the inner corset.

Once you start using your abdominal muscles during your daily activities, they become toned very quickly. After some time, you may be able to see their contours on your abdomen even when you are not flexing your muscles (fig.5-7).

fig.5-7



*The contours of this worker's abdominal muscles are apparent even when he is relaxed (Brazil).*

## TROUBLESHOOTING

### SWAYING THE LOW BACK

This is the most common mistake when learning to elongate your torso (see page 117). Monitoring your spinal groove with one hand as you start to lengthen your back will help you detect the sway and prevent it from happening. If your abdominal muscles need strengthening, you will find suitable exercises in Appendix 1. I recommend doing those exercises regularly until your abdominal muscles reach a threshold level of strength.

## DIFFICULTY BREATHING

If you are accustomed to breathing with your abdomen and not your chest, you may find it difficult to inhale deeply while engaging your inner corset. As part of your inner corset, your abdominal muscles are contracted and resist abdominal expansion during inhalation. But the muscles between your ribs (*intercostals*) may be stiff from a lack of action in the past, and resist chest expansion during inhalation. You will therefore be hampered in your ability to inhale easily. By forcing a few deep inhalations, you stretch your intercostal muscles, making subsequent inhalations easier. Soon you will be able to breathe deeply and easily while engaging your inner corset.

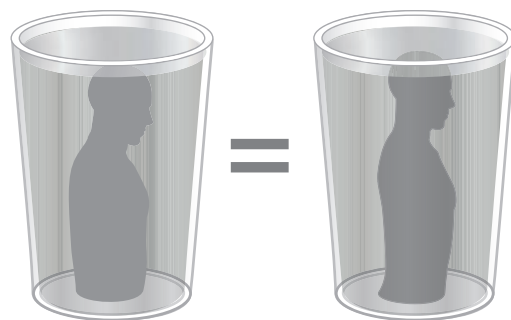
## FURTHER INFORMATION

### LENGTHENING BY CONTRACTING

You might ask how you can lengthen your spine by contracting your muscles. The answer is two-fold.

First, contracting the abdominal muscles causes the abdomen to become narrower. Since the abdomen has a fixed volume, it must become taller, changing its shape from a short, squat cylinder to a tall, thin cylinder (fig.5-8). This action elongates the spine, easing the vertebrae apart and decompressing the discs. The low back feels braced, as though you were wearing the support belt commonly used by workers who carry heavy burdens. You use an inner corset made of your own muscles.

fig.5-8



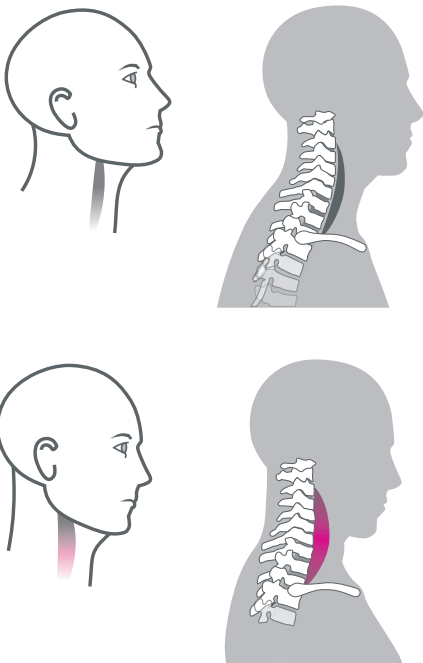
*As your torso get more slender, it must get taller because its volume stays the same.*



Second, certain muscles, because of their geometry, cause the spine to lengthen as they contract. For example, the *longus colli* muscles are located in front of the cervical spine. When these muscles contract, they force the cervical curve to straighten, thus lengthening the cervical spine (fig.5-9).

The deepest muscles of the back (*rotatores*) have a more complex geometry. When used unilaterally (that is, on just one side of the spine), the *rotatores* muscles cause the spine to rotate. When used bilaterally, these muscles cause the spine to elongate. It is difficult to envision how this works but we know from electro-myelographic studies that these muscles are involved in lengthening the spine.

fig.5-9



*The longus colli muscles attach to the front (anterior) part of the neck (cervical) spine. When they contract, they cause the neck to straighten and, therefore, lengthen.*

## JUMPING

Although using your inner corset may seem like a contrived action, you automatically use it whenever your spine is subject to extreme stress. For example, when you jump down from a significant height, you instinctively tighten your inner corset to protect your spine (fig.5-10).

fig.5-10



*The inner corset muscles automatically contract in high stress situations like jumping.*

In situations of moderate stress, however, most people do not have the instinct to use the same protective mechanism. Failure to do so can lead to cumulative damage of spinal structures, damage that we have come to consider a normal part of aging in our culture. By learning to use the inner corset in these situations, you will protect your back from this damage. At the same time, you will be exercising your abdominal muscles.

## REACHING ABOVE YOUR HEAD

A conventional guideline for patients with low back pain is to avoid reaching above the head, as when reaching for a glass on a high shelf or placing luggage in an overhead compartment. If done carelessly, this is indeed a dangerous maneuver. However, by anchoring the rib cage (see Appendix 1) and engaging the inner corset, you can reach up more safely with the side benefit of strengthening the abdominal muscles (fig.5-11).

fig.5-11



*Reaching upwards can be a helpful way to engage the inner corset muscles.*

### PROTECTING YOUR NECK

Just as the inner corset protects the vulnerable lumbar discs, engaging the *longus colli* muscles protects the fragile cervical discs. People in traditional cultures do this when they carry significant weight on their heads. To learn this action, place a soft, light weight, such as a folded towel, on the crown of your head (fig.6-13a on page 144). A common mistake is to place the weight too far forward on your head, causing the chin to rise and the neck to compress (fig.6-13c). Imagine this weight is heavy and actively push up against it (fig.6-13b). Be moderate in this pushing action and only sustain the push for a few seconds.

### USING AN EXTERNAL CORSET

Many people assume that corsets are uncomfortable and unhealthy. In fact, some corsets, such as those used in the 18th century, protected and supported the back (fig.5-12). It is true that in Victorian times, some corsets became extreme and unhealthy (fig.5-13). Yet a moderate corset remains a healthy device; weight lifters regularly wear back support belts, as do workers who carry heavy objects (fig.5-14). The medical profession also prescribes corsets for back pain patients to correct distortions or protect damaged tissues. Simple versions of these are available at medical supply stores and can be useful if you are injured.

fig.5-12



*This early corset is moderate and healthful.*

With inner or external corsets, some people fear loss of flexibility and spinal health. Interestingly, among the Dinkas of Southern Sudan, young people wear corsets with rigid metal ribbing to show their status (fig.5-15). These corsets are

worn day and night for years. The only way to remove a Dinka corset is to cut it, which is done only when a larger size is needed. The corsets permit no appreciable flexion, extension, lateral bending, or twist in the spine. The excellent physique of the Dinka is testimony to how little spinal movement is truly needed to preserve good musculo-skeletal health.

fig.5-13



*Some corsets in the Victorian era (19th century) became extreme and compromised health.*

fig.5-14



*Modern back belts provide support for performing heavy manual labor or in case of injury.*

fig.5-15



© Angela Fisher

*A Dinka corset from Sudan. These are worn day and night for years. Note that the L5-S1 area is allowed to assume its normal curvature.*

Note that the Dinka corset stops at the level of the L5-S1 disc. It is interesting to contrast the Dinka corset with some of the more extensive modern medical corsets and devices. In my clinical experience, most patients, if they need a corset at all, do best with a corset that leaves the pelvis free to settle in an anteverted position. Unfortunately, many of the available medical devices, such as the TLSO body cast (fig.5-16), not only fix the pelvis, but fix it in a retroverted position. The TLSO, according to medical literature, has failed to demonstrate any substantial positive outcome.

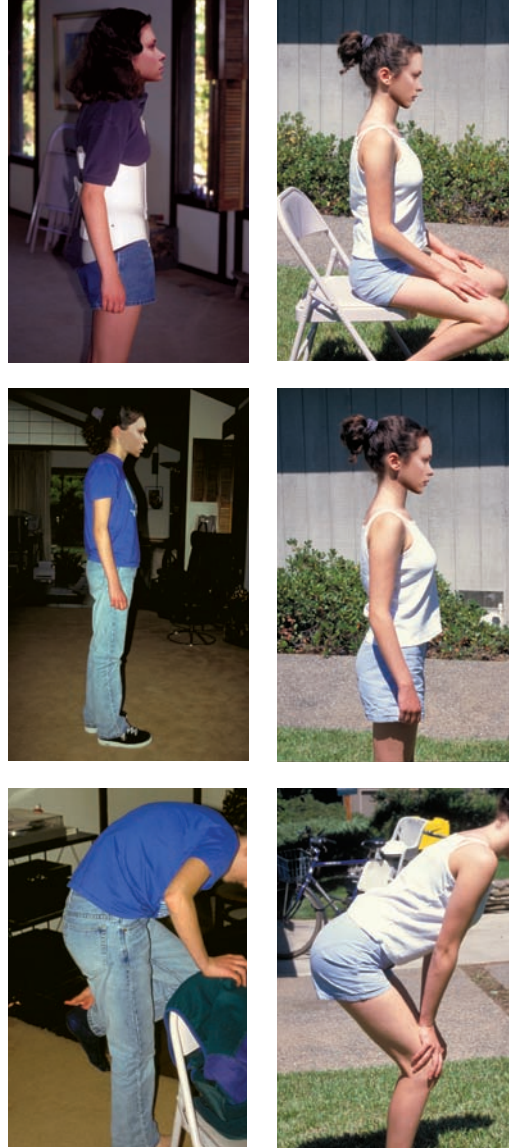
An interesting case study from my practice involves K, who came into my care at age 13. She suffered from *kyphoscoliosis*, a condition in which her spine had excessive curves, both side-to-side and front-to-back. Her father, a physician, had been proactive in arranging care for his daughter. However, after seven months of physical therapy and two custom TLSO body casts supposed to be worn 20 hours a day for two years proved unsuccessful, doctors recommended surgery. The family was not keen on this route. I taught K how to sit, lie, stand, bend, and walk in the ways described in this book. Re-establishing pelvic anteversion and learning to hip-hinge were particularly important elements in her training. The immediate feedback in comfort and improved appearance motivated her strongly. Within two months, her outlook was radically different (fig.5-17). There was no further talk of surgery, body casts, physical therapy, or any other intervention. K is now in college and continues to strike people as a particularly good-looking and poised young lady.

fig.5-16



*An example of a TLSO, a body cast used for children with scoliosis. Notice the flattening effect on the L5-S1 area.*

fig.5-17



*K (age 13 and disguised) with TLSO body cast not producing satisfactory results*

*K after 3 months of training with much-improved appearance and outlook (note the slight sway in the second photograph that she subsequently corrected).*





*Samburu tribesman jumping (Kenya)*



## RECAP



**a. Start in a healthy stack sitting or standing position.**



**b. Monitor groove in back and reach high with one arm**

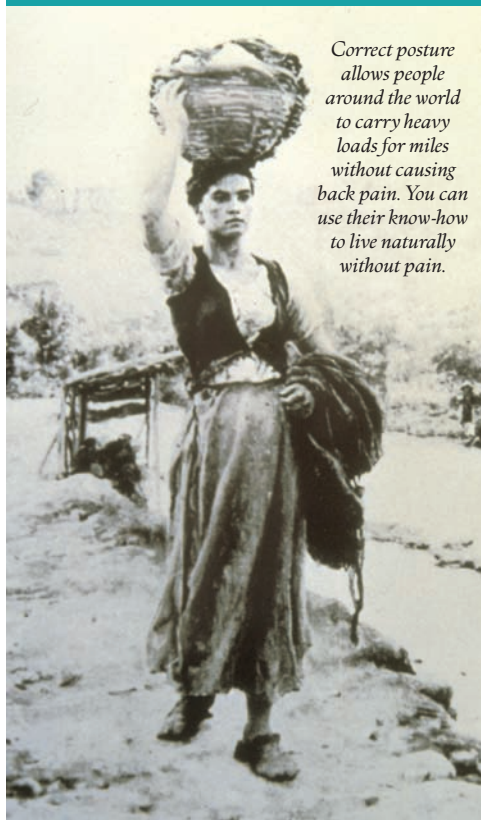


**c. Reach high with both arms**



**d. Lower arms while maintaining inner corset**

Forget what you thought  
you knew about good posture.  
Adopt the natural, healthy  
posture used by athletes,  
children, and people in traditional  
societies the world over.  
Free yourself from pain  
and injury.



*Correct posture  
allows people  
around the world  
to carry heavy  
loads for miles  
without causing  
back pain. You can  
use their know-how  
to live naturally  
without pain.*

**DISCOVER** the posture and movements  
that keep young and old in traditional  
societies free of back pain their entire  
lives.

**LEARN** how to keep your back pain-free  
without medication, surgery, or time-  
consuming exercises.

**TRANSFORM** sitting, standing, walking,  
and bending into comfortable move-  
ments that actually make you healthier  
as you do them.

**ENJOY** revolutionary techniques that will  
decompress your spine, improve circula-  
tion, and relax muscles while you work  
at your computer, watch TV, and sleep.

# Sit, Sleep, and Walk Your Way to a **Pain-Free Back**



*"8 Steps to a Pain-Free Back is the best back pain book on the market. I had significant problems with low back pain and sciatica for more than two decades before Esther Gokhale was able to help me. If I had found her earlier, it could have saved me a great deal of pain and grief."* — **PAUL R. EHRLICH**, BING PROFESSOR OF POPULATION STUDIES, DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES, STANFORD UNIVERSITY. AUTHOR OF *POPULATION BOMB* AND *HUMAN NATURES*

*"The most lucid account I have read of how the human spine works, with handy lessons in how to stand, sit, walk, and sleep free of back pain."* — **J. M. COETZEE**, NOBEL PRIZE WINNER IN LITERATURE, 2003

*"A pleasure to read and a godsend to use. As the pain goes away, you will not only experience relief, you will also come to understand why you feel so much better!"* — **DAVID RIGGS**, MARK PIGOTT OBE PROFESSOR, SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SCIENCES, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, STANFORD UNIVERSITY

*"The Gokhale Method<sup>SM</sup> opens up a new level of health even to those of us who spend most of our week at a desk. Once you have learned this system, it takes no time to implement, yet it works for you 24/7."* — **SUSAN WOJCIKI**, VP OF PRODUCT MANAGEMENT, GOOGLE

*"This is not only a stimulating self-help guide for relief of back pain through healthy posture, but also a work of art that celebrates the grace and poetry of the human body."* — **DAVID WERNER**, AUTHOR, *WHERE THERE IS NO DOCTOR*

## DOCTORS ARE SAYING:

*"The patients I have referred to Esther have, without exception, found her work to be life changing. I have employed her concepts and techniques in my practice, and I have countless patients who have benefited from her work."* — **SALWAN ABI EZZI, M.D.**, INTERNAL MEDICINE, PALO ALTO MEDICAL FOUNDATION

*"Every year tens of thousands of patients undergo major back surgery without any benefits. By using Esther Gokhale's novel techniques, many of these patients can avoid such needless and expensive medical procedures, and quickly return to a pain-free life."* — **JOHN R. ADLER, M.D.**, PROFESSOR OF NEUROSURGERY, STANFORD UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CLINIC

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