



# To bend or not to bend?

**4 min read**

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**H**ave you been warned against bending your back when you lift things? You wouldn't be alone! Current evidence is stacking up against this advice now though, which challenges the thinking behind it. Let me explain...

**T**he advice not to bend comes mostly from research done in laboratories on dead animal spines where the tissues are repeatedly moved and tested until damage occurs. The thought that bending must be harmful and avoided is also linked to assumptions about pain meaning damage: if I bend and it hurts I must be damaging myself, in which case it makes sense to advise people not to bend... right?

**H**ave a few alarm bells started to ring? There are a lot of things wrong with the assumptions in that paragraph. Firstly, can we really assume that what happens to dead tissue which is stressed and loaded in isolation, reliably represents the complexity of what happens in a living human spine when we move? Secondly we know for sure that pain does not correlate with tissue damage – it is perfectly possible to have pain without any tissue damage occurring, even without the existence of tissues at all in the case of Phantom Limb Syndrome. Thirdly, when we are told not to bend our spine when we lift things – whether it's a barbell in the gym, a box at work, a child who wants a cuddle, a shopping bag, a

heavy bag of compost in the garden... and we make efforts to 'brace', to 'stabilise' the spine, to maintain a 'neutral' position while we carry out the lift, are we **actually** able to avoid all bending (spinal flexion) when we lift? Studies have demonstrated that this is really not possible – that even when we think we are not bending, we really are and sometimes quite significantly.

**W**e also know that many people lift things without maintaining a 'straight' spine and don't cause themselves any harm or pain. And we know that many people follow advice to keep their spine straight and do still get pain!

**S**o where do we go with all this? Well it comes down to a few simple things: giving people advice to avoid bending their back when they lift is ultimately not going to protect them from pain; is unrealistic and in some cases distracts people from the real issues that need to be addressed if they struggle with back pain. Advice is moving towards a more individual approach: towards teaching people what it means when they do feel pain; teaching people about some of the reasons behind why they may sometimes feel pain when they lift; that it's far more complex than previously thought and that we need to move on! Here are a few suggestions to get you thinking:

*'something needs to change'*

**If your back hurts when you bend it**, it's unlikely to be because you're damaging it every time, but it is likely that you are getting a message from your body that something needs to change. In our modern world where lots of things restrict the kinds of movements we do every day, the message is often that you need to move more, not less! There are very few occasions where you are likely to cause yourself serious harm through moving, even when you are in pain.

## *'introduce more variety'*

**Is this you:** sleep, sit, eat, drive, sit, walk a bit, drive, sit, eat, sleep, repeat. Our body maintains the health of its joints through moving and loading the tissues in lots of different ways. How could you introduce more variety into your week – change the way you sit or stand, introduce different activities on a regular basis, join a class or do some Pilates or Yoga, or any other whole-body movement practice regularly, try out different stretches and do them regularly.

## *'sleep can play a vital role'*

**How well do you sleep?** Sleep can play a vital role in how well your body copes with everyday stresses and loads – physically and mentally. What other things are going on for your body right now – other health conditions, diet, alcohol intake, medication, stress levels all these things have potential to impact how resilient and robust your body feels.

## **Is the pain stopping you from being more active?**

Paradoxically pain can prevent you from doing the things your body needs to do in order to keep it healthy! If this is you, you may need some help working through the problem – either painkillers or anti-inflammatories, or advice from a trained professional or your GP.

## *'reach out!'*

## **Can you sort this out yourself or do you need some**

**help?** If you can't fathom out where to start with all of this, you're worried there may be something more serious wrong or you just need some support while you work it out, reach out! You don't need to sign up for months of costly treatments or become dependent on someone else to 'fix' things for you, but getting the advice of a trained trusted professional can set you on the right course quickly and cut out a lot of trial and error.

I have worked with patients with complex musculoskeletal conditions and pain for 15 years and hold clinics in Cumbria and the Yorkshire Dales every week. I see patients regularly for pain education and advice as well as hands-on treatments. You can get in touch with me about this kind of thing through my Facebook pages: [ReflexOrthoMassage](#) or [Logic Pain Education](#) where you'll find loads more no-nonsense vlogs and info all about the latest in pain science and research, or my websites: [www.reflex-om.com](http://www.reflex-om.com) and [www.logicpaineducation.com](http://www.logicpaineducation.com).

If you'd like to read more about this including some of the research I have referred to, take a look at this [blog page](#) where you will find links to the research and much more information.

I strive to keep the things I put on my sites well-informed and up to date but if you do find anything amiss or would like to chat about how it may not fit into your understanding of the subject drop me a line and lets get talking! If you would like me to come and talk to a group of people you know – get in touch – send me a message or email me: **[jolade71@gmail.com](mailto:jolade71@gmail.com)**.