British Chiropractic Association

Driving Comfortably with the British Chiropractic Association

We are a nation of increasing car use – but at what cost to our bodies?

Tim Hutchful, a chiropractor from the British Chiropractic Association says:
"There is almost twice as much pressure on your back when you are sitting incorrectly than there is if you stand up. Those most at risk are the people who not only spend long periods of time in the car, but also those who make infrequent short journeys in the car – because it can be compared to an unaccustomed form of exercise."

Follow these top tips from the British Chiropractic Association:

Make adjustments

- If you share a car, make sure you adjust the seat position to suit you when you get in.
- Make sure the seat is slightly backwards so that it feels natural and that your elbows are at a comfortable and relaxed angle for driving.

Steering wheel

- Once you have adjusted your seat correctly, your hands should fall naturally on the steering wheel with just a slight bend in the arms.
- If the wheel is too high and far away from you, tension will build up in your shoulders and upper back.
- If it is too low and close to you, the wheel may be touching your legs, which will reduce your ability to turn it freely, so putting strain on the wrists and the muscles of the upper back.

***NB airbag safety**: If you have adjusted your seat and steering wheel following these notes, it is highly unlikely that you will be closer than the recommended ten inches from the airbag cover in your steering wheel. Please ensure that your seat and wheel adjustments allow for this ten-inch minimum.*

Mirrors

It is essential that you set your mirror positions to suit you before you drive off, especially if someone else has been using the car.

- Your reactions must be quick, so you should not need to move your head a lot. The mirror positions should allow you to see all around the car with the movement of your eyes, requiring minimal head movement.

Seatbelts

- Your seatbelt should always lie across the top of your shoulder and should never rub against your neck or fall onto the top of your arm.
- Depending on your height, you may need to adjust the position at which the seat belt emerges from the body of the car.

If the adjustments available on your car are insufficient, it is possible to purchase clips that help you adjust your seat belt height without impairing safety.

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Footwear

- Once you have adjusted your seat correctly, your feet should fall naturally onto the pedals. You should be able to press the pedals to the floor by mainly moving your ankle and only using your leg a little.
- Avoid wearing wear high heels, or very thick-soled shoes, as you will have to over-extend the ankle in order to put pressure on the pedals. As well as making it much harder to deal with an emergency stop, this position will raise your thigh from the seat (reducing support to your leg) and create tension (and possibly cramp) in the calf. This in turn will impair the blood flow on a long journey.

Lifting

- Face the direction in which you want to carry the weight. Always lift using a relaxed, straight back. Make sure your legs are at least your hips' width apart with the knees bent. Keep your head and shoulders directly above the weight you're lifting and look straight ahead.
- Avoid bending from the waist, which increases the stress on your lower back. Never keep the knees straight, as this will lead to over-stretching and damage to your back and never lift while twisting from the waist.

Loading and unloading

- Loading a weight into a car is difficult at the best of times, so it is even more important to use the best technique possible. Having lifted the weight (see above), rest it on the bumper where possible and then push it into the car keeping your back straight and your knees bent. Always put lighter objects into your car first, towards the back, so that it is not too strenuous to push them in or to pull them out when you reach your destination.
- Never lift and then twist; avoid the temptation to straighten your legs. This is just as important when taking bags or boxes out of the car – don't try and lift more than one or two carrier bags out at a time, especially if you've had a bad back in the past.

Changing a tyre

- Some jacks can be very stiff, so brace yourself by putting one knee on the ground (use a newspaper, road atlas or other 'padding'), facing side-on to the car. Keep your back straight, looking straight ahead with your shoulders over the handle. Use both hands to move the handle (remember that you are lifting a car up!). If it's tiring, take a break from time to time. Avoid standing with your legs straight and bending as this puts great strain on the lower back.
- To undo the wheel nuts, assume the same position as for jacking. This will allow you to use your body weight to help push down the wheel brace. Keep your arms slightly bent. To tighten wheel nuts, face the opposite way, so that you can again take advantage of your body weight to make the job easier and safer.
- Never position yourself so that you are pulling against gravity; this will put enormous stress on your back and shoulders – and if the brace slipped off the nut, you may fall.
- You may find it helpful to invest in a small length of metal piping that you can attach to the wheel brace to extend the leverage.

Babies

- When putting your baby into the car, hold the baby close to you as you move towards the vehicle. Keep your back straight and bend your knees when you have got as close to the car seat as possible. Only at this stage should you reach out to put the baby in the seat. If you're carrying the baby in a chair, rest the chair on the edge of the car seat, then manoeuvre it into position within the car, keeping your knees bent and back straight.
- Don't try to reach out too early and avoid bending from the waist.

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Relax
A relaxed driving position reduces stress on the spine, allowing your seat to take your weight.

Take regular breaks
The BCA advises that you should stop and stretch your legs (and arms!) at least every two hours, more often if possible. You should certainly stop more frequently if you are feeling any discomfort.

Clench your cheeks
If you are stuck in traffic, exercise in your seat. Try buttock clenches, side bends and shoulder shrugs and circles

Leave the tight clothes at home
They will restrict your movement.

It's all in the timing
Allow plenty of time for journeys to avoid stress.

Chiropractors treat problems with your joints, bones and muscles, and the effects they have on your nervous system. Working on all the joints of your body, concentrating particularly on the spine, they use their hands to make gentle, specific adjustments (the chiropractic word for manipulation) to improve the efficiency of your nervous system and release your body's natural healing ability. Chiropractic does not involve the use of any drugs or surgery.
The information here is guidance and you should consult a BCA chiropractor or other healthcare professional for further specific advice if you are experiencing pain, have an existing injury or other medical condition.

For more information or to find a BCA chiropractor in your area:

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Like medical practitioners and dentists, all chiropractors are registered by law. Members of the British Chiropractic Association (BCA) are registered with the UK regulator, the General Chiropractic Council and the association only accepts members who have graduated from an internationally recognised college of chiropractic education after a minimum of four years full-time training. The BCA promotes high standards of conduct, practice, education and training.

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