

BACKUP *plan*



Story | ANGELA AMBROSE

If you're going on a long road trip this holiday, you know the importance of planning ahead: checking the tires and brakes, changing the oil and filling up the gas tank before you get on the road. Like your car, your spine requires regular maintenance to function properly.

“People don't realize that they have back bones and nerves that need to be serviced and taken care of. There's no awareness until it hurts,” says Kenneth Hansraj, M.D., a New York orthopedic and spinal surgeon and author of *Keys to An Amazing Life: Secrets of the Cervical Spine*.

The single most important factor in preventing back and neck pain is good posture, according to Hansraj. When you're fatigued, especially during a long road trip, your shoulders, back and neck tend to round forward, placing excessive

pressure on the spine. To achieve good posture, Hansraj advises his patients to align their ears above their shoulders and retract their shoulder blades.

Before getting on the road, make adjustments to your seat, steering wheel and armrests to create a more comfortable

environment that supports good posture. For added lumbar support, place a small pillow or rolled up shirt at the curvature of your lower back.

“The spine is a combination of 24 precious pairs of joints, and they all need to be moved to feel good and for maintenance and preventing back pain,” Hansraj says. “They're not meant to be in one position.”

To reduce the risk of back and neck soreness, take a break from driving every couple of hours and do some spine stretches. Perform gentle back bending, toe touches, side stretches and neck range of motion exercises, including side-to-side, up-and-down and ear-to-shoulder stretches.

Just as your car operates better with preventive maintenance, so does your body. Make time for regular exercise and adequate sleep and hydration, especially in the weeks before and after the holidays when we often fuel our bodies with too many sweets and alcoholic drinks.

“Spinal health is intimately connected with general health,” Hansraj says. To maintain a healthy back, he suggests engaging in three key areas of fitness: aerobic activities that elevate the heart rate, core strengthening exercises such as pushups and situps and stretching.

“Deep stretching is a phenomenal way to start your day,” Hansraj says. Performing yoga poses and deep belly breathing can enhance spine flexibility and also help you relax and de-stress throughout your holiday trip. Planning ahead and performing preventive maintenance will ensure both you and your car arrive at your holiday destination in top condition. ✦

DID YOU KNOW?

Four out of five Americans will experience significant back pain during their lives, according to Dr. Kenneth Hansraj. Medical costs for back and neck care topped \$115 billion last year, second in frequency only to the common cold.