



DIVING WITH A SORE BACK

Back pain is a common occurrence these days with sedentary lifestyles, but it needn't deter divers from enjoying their time in the water. Divers can manage chronic back pain whilst travelling and diving, plus take steps to minimise the chance of back injuries reoccurring

By Kathryn Curzon

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THE RIGHT GEAR

Weights

Choosing the right dive gear is important in minimising back pain, particularly lower back pain. Whilst most divers learn with a weight belt around the waist, and weights distributed around the waistline, there are other options for those prone to back pain. Weights placed in buoyancy control device (BCD) pockets and a weight strapped to the tank can help to take weight off the lower back when diving. Positioning weights on a belt at the front of the waistline, instead of towards the back, also helps to take pressure off the lower spine and can be more comfortable. It is important to have a buddy check a diver's body position and trim when making changes to dive weight configurations, to ensure the diver is going to be able to move with minimal drag and isn't arching their back excessively.

BCD

The right buoyancy control device is also important and divers should try a variety of styles and brands before settling on one. Different people have different spinal lengths and shapes, plus different

upper body sizes. BCDs vary to accommodate these differences, with a range of sizes and positions available. It is a good idea to also look at the pocket positions for weights and maybe even consider a diver wing instead of the traditional BCD design.

Suits

Being cold can easily aggravate a sore back when shivering and when muscles tense up. It is essential to choose the right wetsuit, or drysuit and thermal undersuit combination, that will maintain good body warmth even after a full day of diving. The addition of a thermal undergarment under neoprene, such as a thermal rash vest, can make a big difference to the body temperature without the need to purchase a thicker wetsuit. There are excellent thermal undersuits available for drysuit diving and even heated vest options for the cold-blooded diver.

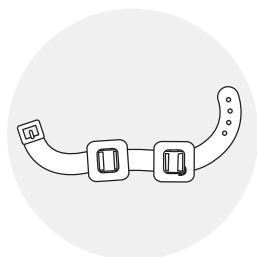
If mobility is an issue, an exposure-protection suit with a front-entry or easily-reachable zips is helpful. Consideration should be given to ease of entry and exit from the suit and, if purchasing a semi-dry or drysuit, whether the wrist and neck seals can be released with minimal tugging that could strain the back.

ABOVE

Choosing the right gear is essential when dealing with a sore back on a dive

Mask and Fins

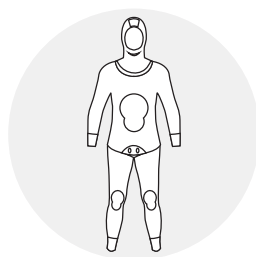
For those who struggle to bend or turn their necks, choose carefully before purchasing a mask and fins. Open-heel fins with spring fin straps allow for easy removal with minimal bending required. A wide field-of-view mask helps reduce the need to twist or crane the neck during dives and allows the diver to fully enjoy the view.



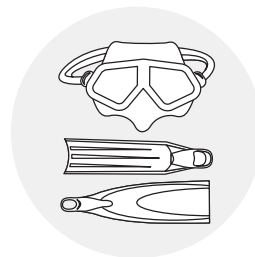
WEIGHTS



BCD



SUITS



MASK AND FINNS

DURING THE DIVE

Once a diver has the right gear set up for their needs, it's time to get in the water and discover ways to minimise the risk of injury. Divers shouldn't be afraid to ask for help – that alone is important in proper back care. Divers can ask their dive buddy, or dive guide, to help carry their dive kit to the water or boat to help minimise spinal compression from the weight of dive gear. Consideration should be given to the best water entry and exit technique, preferably alternatives to giant strides and back rolls that can load and strain the back. Sitting at the edge of a boat or jetty, before putting on dive gear, can minimise back pain and load. The same can also be said for putting dive kit on once in the water. When exiting the water, dive gear should be removed and passed up to a dive buddy or guide rather than exiting the water with full kit on the diver's back.

Correct body positioning and finning are important to prevent back pain. Scissor kicks from the hips may be great for momentum but they can strain the back. A good alternative finning technique is the frog kick, which can be easily learnt and puts less strain on the spine. It also happens to be a great finning technique for minimising sand and silt disturbance at dive sites. Divers should consider a session with an instructor to learn different finning techniques whilst checking for unnatural back arching or strain.

POST-DIVE CARE

Once a diver is out of the water, post-dive warmth is key to keeping sensitive backs relaxed and warm. Changing into warm clothing, including a woolly hat, will reduce the likelihood of shivering after a dive. Wearing a warm hat between dives is a great way to reduce heat loss even when still wearing a wetsuit, though changing into dry clothes is

preferable. Warm drinks and high energy snacks are also helpful.

A simple kit for relieving back pain can make a big difference when on a remote diving trip and unable to access a physiotherapist. Include pain relief and anti-inflammatory medication, a tennis or cricket ball for self-massage of the back, a hot water bottle for easing muscle tension, a lumbar

support brace, and a length of physiotherapist band for stretching leg muscles without mobilising a painful spine. It is also worth finding the contact details of a local physiotherapist and massage therapist prior to any injury occurring, if possible.

Long-term care is important to minimise the impact of an existing spinal injury and to prevent future injuries from occurring. Yoga and pilates are popular and effective for preventing back injuries by improving flexibility, core strength, and posture. Back problems are sometimes due to tight muscles and the combination of stretching and core strength are helpful for spinal relaxation and protection. Swimming can be helpful for easing back pain, though it can aggravate certain back problems due to spinal arching in different swimming positions. Divers with back injuries should seek medical advice prior to undertaking new sports, or work with a sports coach, and consider seeing a physiotherapist for a personalised yoga and pilates routine. A set of stretches and core-strengthening exercises can easily be done at home or whilst travelling.

Finally, back stiffness and pain can be due to poorly hydrated or injured spinal discs. Be sure to keep hydrated every day to allow spinal discs to rehydrate and support the back for years to come. [SDAA](#)



Kathryn Curzon is a writer, public speaker, great white shark dive guide, and co-founder of the marine conservation cause Friends for Sharks. In 2015, she completed 87 talks in eight countries during her World Tour for Sharks. She is the author of an award-winning inspirational memoir, *No Damage* (on Amazon).