



1 MAX HEADROOM
Make a fist with your thumb over index finger. Can you put it upright on your head without touching the roof lining? If not, the lack of room may be causing you to slouch or hunch.

2 STRAIGHT TALKING
Put your hands in a praying pose and point them towards the steering wheel. If they're not aiming at the middle of the badge, the wheel is offset, which may cause unnatural twisting of the spine.

3 TELL-TALE SIGNS OF BACK PROBLEMS
Twinges in back and neck when getting into car; muscles or joints ache or lock up while driving; tingling or numb limbs and buttocks when driving; can't straighten properly when getting out of vehicle; walking differently after driving.

4 THE RIGHT STUFF
As you drive, does your right leg rest on the door trim? It should be in line with the hip and shoulder. If not, it could indicate trouble ahead.

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Max Glaskin

COME on in, the chiropractor will see you now! That was the invitation given to four Auto Express readers suffering from car-related back problems. This week is Chiropractic Awareness Week, and we wanted to do something to help the hundreds of thousands of drivers who suffer every day. Back pain is a spine chilling epidemic, and more than 32,000 motorists visit specialists each month with injuries caused or aggravated by a bad driving posture. Foolishly, thousands more ignore the tell-tale signs.

And just because a driver feels no pain today, it doesn't mean they are sitting properly behind the wheel – it's feasible that they could be storing up trouble for the future, but don't know it yet. That slight stiffness in a muscle or that little twinge is a warning which should be heeded.

Our specialist at the Auto Express clinic was Timothy Hutchful, an expert based in Leicester. As a chiropractor, Tim specialises in diagnosing and treating problems associated with the joints, ligaments, tendons and nerves, in particular those which affect the spine itself.

"Every person's situation is different and my advice is specific to each individual case," said Tim. "But many of these tips could help to save others from future back problems." So, with the clinic open for business, here's what happened...



Tim Hutchful (right) shows our man Glaskin how spine can be misaligned by poor driving position

Hundreds of thousands of UK motorists suffer back ache caused by driving. We took four to a special Auto Express clinic to get some expert advice on how to beat the pain

Pictures: Tom Wood

CASE 1

Name: Karl Massey
Symptom: Pain in lower back
Diagnosis: Twisted pelvis
Advice: Reduce height between mat and pedals; put a thin cushion on seat squab

A CHANGE of car triggered Karl Massey's first-ever experience of back pain. He swapped his automatic Smart ForTwo for a manual Isuzu Trooper off-roader, and now suffers an ache about half an hour into his 40-minute commute.

"I'd never had problems before," said Karl, 45, a computer analyst from Peatling Magna, Leicestershire. Tim examined Karl and said the left side of his pelvis was weak. "It's mechanical, not neurological," he added. "We can do something with your sitting position to improve the situation. Show me how you get into your car."

Karl opened the Trooper's door, put his right hand on the wheel and was about to climb in when Tim shouted: "Stop! You're twisting and bending at the same time, which puts a strain on your back before you have even sat down. Put your left hand on the wheel, right hand on the inside door handle and slide in, keeping your ears, shoulders and hips in line."

Karl did so, and stepped in. Then Tim spotted that Karl had to lift his left heel from the floor to reach the high clutch pedal. "That can cause



SITTING PRETTY: Karl Massey had no idea that his aching lower back could be eased simply by adjusting his sitting position. He was relieved that our chiropractor Tim offered a solution



Longer pedal or thicker mat would help foot

problems," he pointed out. "You can solve this by putting something under the floor mat, or fitting pedal extenders." The sitting position needed slight adjustments, as well: "Your knee should be the same height or lower than your hip. Sitting on a folded towel will subtly change the tilt of your pelvis so it can absorb shocks better." This expert advice was appreciated. "I was amazed by the diagnosis. I thought I'd trapped a nerve or something," said Karl. "I had no idea I had a weak pelvis."

BRITAIN'S SPINE CHILLER

inside story

BONE SHAKERS!

CASE 2

Name: Martin Allinson
Symptoms: Pain extended down lower back and legs, numbing in right leg
Diagnosis: Bone in lower spine is locking
Advice: Get out of car with care; use a long-handled brush when washing vehicle

WORKING at a computer may have caused the initial twinges for Martin, 24, a quantity surveyor from Kettering, Northants. But now they make driving and cleaning his Nissan 200SX painful chores. Tim immediately got to work.

"Martin's hamstrings are very tight," he revealed. "That stops him from touching his toes, and may also affect his back. I don't think his car has caused the problems, but it may be aggravating them." Our expert advised Martin to sit however he felt most comfortable in the vehicle, which was with the back reclined a long way.

Then he asked Martin to get out of the car, and Tim noticed that this action could be making matters worse. "Your shoulders are pointing one way, hips another and your left leg is sticking out behind," he told Martin. "That's not going to help. You should try swivelling round on the seat first, so your whole body is facing in the same direction, before you move out of the car."

The back pain was also making Martin think twice about cleaning his 200SX. "People often bend, twist and stretch when they're washing their car, which can be painful if there's already a problem," Tim agreed. "But it's easy to solve – buy yourself a soft brush with a long handle and use it with a square bucket. Then you can reach everywhere on the car with less risk of straining."

Martin had recently fitted a new exhaust, which, Tim said, may have changed the harmonics of the vehicle, adding to the irritation. The physical diagnosis was a relief for Martin: "I'd seen a GP and even had my kidneys scanned. Now Tim's come along and what he says makes real sense," he revealed. "I'll take care of my back, and I won't need a beaded seat cover!"



SOUND SUGGESTION: Tim pointed out to Martin Allinson that the strong resonance from his aftermarket exhaust could be adding to the discomfort the quantity surveyor suffered when he was driving his Nissan 200SX.

CASE 3

Name: Geoff Savage
Symptoms: Constant pain in lower back
Diagnosis: Slipped disc
Advice: Change position of seat and use seat-memory facility to ease entry and exit

CHANGING gear in a borrowed BMW 3-Series changed Geoff's life. "I pushed the clutch and that was it. Bang. I'd slipped a disc," said the 48-year-old IT manager from Worcester Park, Surrey. Now, more than three years later, the pain kicks in only 10 minutes after he starts driving.

"Geoff had been driving automatics for years before trying his friend's BMW," said Tim. "He didn't set up the seat position and the mirrors. His back hadn't warmed up. He may have had a weakness already. It was a combination of factors, and pressing the clutch was the last straw."

Geoff believes the heated seats in his own Audi A6 Allroad are beneficial. Tim suggested: "Set the variable suspension at its highest setting when parking, so you don't have to bend so much when getting in and out. Set one of the seat memories with the chair some way back and the wheel out of the way as much as possible, too. Leather seats are easier than cloth to swivel on."

To improve the driving position, Tim shifted the seat backwards, so Geoff's knee would be more relaxed and his thighs had more support from the squab. The steering wheel was also extended, and the head restraint was raised to improve passive safety. "Using a seat memory for getting in and out is brilliant," Geoff said. "And I've been sitting too high, so the new position stops me cramping. I'm going to keep it like that."

CASE 4

Name: Ranj Kaler
Symptoms: Pain in the neck, intermittent back pain, numb right leg on long journeys
Diagnosis: Twisted pelvis
Advice: Stop sitting on your wallet!



DISC FACTOR: Having suffered from a slipped disc, Geoff Savage was keen to learn how he could improve his driving position. He felt the heated seats in his Audi already helped, and Tim suggested adjusting the chair, too.

Tim's top tips for a pain-free drive

"THERE'S almost twice as much pressure on your back when you are sitting incorrectly than there is if you stand up," Tim revealed. "Everybody develops a way to sit comfortably, but there are some general guides to follow to reduce the risk of a bad back." Here are a few simple suggestions for you to try.

1. Adjust the seat so it leans slightly back and your elbows are at a comfortable angle.
1. Your hands should fall naturally on the wheel with only a slight bend in your arms.
2. Set the mirrors so you can see all round the car with only a small rotation of the neck.
3. Make sure you can floor the pedals simply by moving your ankle.
4. Avoid wearing high heels or thick-soled shoes when motoring.
5. Relax while driving to reduce stress on the spine. Let the seat take your weight.
6. Stop at least every two hours on a long journey to stretch your legs and arms.
7. If you're stuck in traffic, try some gentle exercises such as buttock clenches, side bends and shoulder shrugs.



AFTER Ranj swapped his manual Vauxhall Calibra for an automatic Audi A6, his neck pain began. Now his back hurts whenever he's sitting or even lying down. "I'm all right standing for hours," said Ranj of Raynes Park, London. "Is it the car?"

Tim asked Ranj to sit at the wheel, then took a turn in the driver's seat himself. "It feels as if the seat's sloping towards the door," he noted. "Do you carry a wallet in your back right-hand pocket?" Amazed, the DJ nodded. "It's dented the seat, which is aggravating your problem," said Tim. "Driving with anything in your back pocket affects posture." Ranj may have to get the seat reupholstered. Tim advised on minor adjustments to his sitting position so his muscles would

relax more. The squab went back a few centimetres, the seat back was made more upright, the floor mat was raised, and he altered the steering wheel rake so that it was less sharply angled.

"The aim is to open the curve between the torso and the thighs to about 110 degrees," explained Tim, and Ranj noticed a difference immediately. "My back is supported much more. I can't believe it was down to my wallet – a self-inflicted injury I didn't know I was causing! I'll have to find another place to keep the cash."

● For your nearest BCA chiropractor, visit www.chiropractic-uk.co.uk or call the British Chiropractic Association on 0118 950 5950. ● **PAGE 68: Are you sitting comfortably?**



WALLET BE? DJ Ranj Kaler was astonished to learn that by keeping his wallet in a back pocket, he'd indented the driving seat to such an extent that it caused chronic back pain. A few small changes were all it took to help him.