Everyday activities can have a toll on your body, and when you’re caring for a loved one, those tasks and chores can zap your energy and even cause pain. The energy conservation strategies in this e-book can help you protect yourself from injury and fatigue while caregiving. It can look like planning ahead, re-organizing your environment, or changing the way you move your body. Try out one section at a time to see what works for you. Remember that change takes time, so be patient with yourself as you try to apply these tips.
The way you move your body can help or hurt you.

Body mechanics is now a studied science of the way we move our bodies (this is commonly called “ergonomics” in the workplace when it involves desk set-up and seated posture). When a person uses proper body mechanics, it can decrease muscle fatigue, pain, joint stress, and the risk of injury.¹

Keep at neutral spine:

Head in line with neck.²

- ✓ Ear in line with shoulder
- ✗ Chin forward, straining neck and shoulders

Work close to your body:

Do not work outside of your comfortable reach.² This prevents back, shoulder, and neck pain/ fatigue

- ✓ Move objects closer throughout a task.
- ✗ Working farther away from the body strains the neck, upper back, and shoulders.
Face what you are doing or whom you are talking to:

Avoid sitting, working, or lifting in a twisted position\(^2\) to help neck, back, and hip pain.

- **√** Straight spine
- **✗** Twisted and curved spine

Prevent neck and back pain:

Bend from your hips instead of curving your spine.\(^2\)

- **√** “Hinge” at the hips for low tasks, like washing dishes, washing your face, or brushing your teeth.
- **✗** “Hunched” over with curved spine: try sitting on a kitchen stool if you are tall and find yourself hunching often.

One last tip!

Change positions frequently, about every 30 minutes,\(^2\) to avoid stiffness, aches, and pain.
Lifting safely

The muscles in our legs that we use to lift heavy things are much stronger and larger than the muscles in our back. There are many smaller muscles and body tissues that support our spine, and these can be strained and injured when we use them to do heavy work that they are not designed to do. Here are three ways to lift both heavy and light objects.

1. Squat:

Keep a straight spine, bend at the hips, and have feet shoulder width apart for a wide base of support, or stable footing.²

- Hips pushed back. This option is great for those with knee pain, as the hips are doing most of the bending.
- Curved spine strains back and neck

2. Diagonal:

Keep one foot in front of the other, shoulder length apart. Keep front foot flat on the ground.²

- Wide and stable base of support. This is great for getting heavy objects off the floor, like a case of water.
- Both heels off the ground stresses the knees and is not a stable base support.
3. Golfer’s lift

Create a wide base of support by stabilizing one arm on a surface and keeping the opposite foot flat on the floor. Bend at the waist, but allow the non-planted leg to extend backwards.² Think of the way a teeter totter moves, or a Barbie doll.

✔ Straight spine, hinging at hips. This is great for light objects like clothing, or for unloading the dishwasher, washer, and dryer.

❌ Curved spine strains back and neck
Work smarter, not harder! Tips for everyday chores

Work simplification can be summed up as finding a new way of doing a task, instead of completely giving it up. In other words, the same task still gets done but with less physical demand on your body.

Reorganizing the environment:

Buy smaller sizes of heavy liquids:
Like laundry detergent or milk, or pour liquids into smaller containers for everyday use.

Elbow height:
Store frequently used items on counters whenever possible. Otherwise, store objects on the lowest shelf of the upper cabinets or in the highest drawer.

Using body mechanics:

Sit to do a task whenever possible:
If you normally sort laundry on the bed, try sorting it at the kitchen table. Chop vegetables at the table instead of at the counter, or use a kitchen stool.
Use the fewest and largest muscles to do the job.²

- Keep the vacuum handle at your hip and push with your legs, keeping a straight spine.
- Curving the spine stresses the back, shoulder, and wrists when vacuuming. Walk with the vacuum, don’t plant your feet and push and pull it.

Get close to objects.²

- Keep a straight spine and look down with your eyes. Walk to where you need to sweep.
- Do not bend the whole upper body to look down. Do not strain your neck and back by planting your feet and reaching.
Adaptive equipment:

Conserve energy by using adaptive equipment (AE). Your loved one can also increase independence and take on more responsibilities in their own care by using AE, for they will be able to do more activities with less pain and/or fatigue. These products are available at pharmacies, big box stores, home health supply stores, and the internet. Here are just a few common pieces of equipment that can make life easier. Ask your doctor or an occupational therapist for training in how to use more types of AE.

**Cart**
A cart can be used to move frequently used items from room to room.

**Shower chair**
A shower chair can reduce fatigue by allowing you to sit while showering.

***Ask your doctor or an occupational therapist about how to use a tub bench for your loved one if they become fatigued while showering or are a fall risk in the shower.***

**Loofa / Sponge**
A long-handled loofa or sponge can reduce arm fatigue and pain while washing the back. It can also minimize the need for bending to clean the feet and lower legs.

**Grabber / Reacher**
A grabber (or reacher) can be used to pick up lightweight objects from the floor or high places.

**Shoehorn**
Use a long-handled shoehorn to minimize bending and make sliding on shoes easier. Your loved one can also use this tool if it is difficult or unsafe for them to bend over while seated.

Setting realistic expectations:

Another part of work simplification is setting realistic expectations for yourself.

- Is there a chore you can delegate or hand off to another person?
- Can you get away with cleaning the bathroom every other week instead of every week?

Making small changes in your environment or your normal way of doing things can make a big difference, but old habits die hard! Be patient with yourself, and try just a few tips at a time. See what works best for you and your lifestyle.
Break the habit of “overdoing it” and paying for it later.

Activity pacing is just what it sounds like: pacing yourself! It involves pre-planning before an activity to reduce our bad habit of “overdoing it” and paying for it later. We’ll call this our overexertion cycle. The cycle begins when we ignore our body’s signals of pain and fatigue and push through it anyway. Then we experience a time of exhaustion or pain when we can’t be as productive as we want or need to be. When we recover, we push through more tasks because we know another period of being down and out is coming. This cycle creates short windows of productivity and long periods of recovery. Activity pacing can help break this cycle with a few general guidelines.

**Overexertion Cycle**

- **Push through**
  - to do a task, ignoring body's signals to rest

- **Exhaustion**
  - Time of exhaustion and/or pain

- **Recovery**
  - Worry about another time of exhaustion

- Rest before you are tired or in pain. Decide how long you will do an activity before starting it. Set a timer to remind you to take a break until you get into the habit.
- Take short breaks often, not a few long breaks.
- Alternate between heavy and light activities.
- Plan ahead to spread out heavy activities.

Some examples could be:

- Do a load of laundry every few days instead of three loads in one day.
- If planning a dinner or party:
  - Shop for food a few days before
  - Choose foods that can be prepped the day before
  - Schedule rest before people arrive.


