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Six ways to make driving more comfortable

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On a frightful Friday evening in mid-August when stormy winds blew away a portion of the roof at Delhi Airport, 41-year-old Preetha Nair was stuck at the wheels for four hours, like thousands of others.



Back up while driving to avoid damage to neck, spine (Getty Images)

The rains played havoc with traffic and Nair, on her way home, was among the tide of office-goers trapped on the roads. The next day saw Nair, a media professional, confine to her bed with an excruciating back pain brought on by her hours in the car.

Experts say if only Nair had invested in a small back brace, she could have prevented straining her back so badly. Back supports and neck collars are useful preventive aids to avoid injury to the lumbar region and cervical region while driving.

According to K.N. Krishna, consultant neurosurgeon at Wockhardt Hospitals, Bangalore, prolonged journeys can lead to uncomfortable problems for the back and neck. "We travel in vehicles that appear luxurious but not comfortable at all for the back," he says.

A survey among bus drivers of the state-run Delhi Transport Corporation and others by MGRM Medicare, a research-based rehabilitation products company that makes braces and splints, revealed that a majority suffered from back pain.

Indeed, during the survey, the company also discovered the reason for the annoying habit that these drivers have of parking the buses in the middle of the road while picking up passengers rather than on the kerbside.

Because of back-pain, they wanted minimum turns on the wheel which exacerbated their pain. Let's, therefore, look at what happens to the back typically while driving.

Often, the spine is subjected to considerable vibration and jolting. If the vehicle has poor suspension, then the problem is compounded - especially on pot-hole-laden Indian roads.

During prolonged periods of driving, the natural lumbar curve of the body is also practically lost, thereby putting extra strain on the vertebrae and discs. When the driver's seat is pushed back - and so many people tend to do that - it causes the legs to be straighter, placing strain on the hamstrings.

Driving also places a huge load on the cervical spine, or the neck area, as one has to flex the neck up to look straight ahead while at the wheels.

Even passengers can suffer from back strain as many car seats are badly designed. Also, when seated, pressure is placed most on the spine and sides of the hips. The sitting bones (ischial tuberosities) support 75 percent of the body's weight.

Experts, accordingly, propose six ways to make driving more comfortable for the back:

-Proper seat alignment: Make sure your seats are at the correct distance away from the clutch and accelerator and offer maximum driving comfort.

-Frequent breaks: When undertaking long trips, make sure you plan enough breaks to stretch your legs and exercise your muscles.

-Stay close to the wheel: Make sure you are close enough to the wheel so that your elbows are slightly bent.

-Check the Suspensions : Is your vehicle in optimum condition? It's a good idea to keep the car well oiled, greased and in prime condition so that unnecessary jerks and discomfort are avoided.

-Invest in a portable cushion or a lumbar support: Even a small towel rolled up and placed between the lower back and seat could work wonders. But make sure it has some scientific basis.

-Wear a back support: This will ensure correct posture and the additional support to the lumbosacral region will provide comfort during travel. For very long journeys, a soft neck collar made of foam and properly contoured could prevent damage to the cervical region. But, again, ensure you have a well-designed support.

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