



## Get on Track: Win the Race Against Pain

By Amy Rice, MSPT, Center for Pain Management

**Your body is pinned to the seat. Over four times the weight of gravity is pressing you against the car's tiny cockpit. In a mere second, you rocket the length of a football field. The roar of the engine deafens your ears; the vibrations blur your vision. This is the typical driving experience of an Indycar professional.**

Although many of us may fantasize about driving a race car around Indy's historic oval track, in our lifetimes we probably won't have the opportunity to experience that thrill — or the agony. At 200 miles per hour, many factors can inflict pain on drivers, including G-forces and vibrations. You won't experience the same intensity as a race car driver simply commuting to and from work or driving the kids to soccer practice. However, daily driving can indeed result in chronic pain.

In a recent poll conducted by Motion Trends, more than 30 percent of drivers report developing pain associated with driving. The healthy human body can tolerate sitting in one position for about 20 minutes at a time. Just driving to and from work — being sedentary in the seat of your vehicle — can add sustained stress over time on the muscles, ligaments, tendons and discs of the neck and back.

Back or neck pain due to driving is most often caused by poor posture which impedes circulation and deprives the lower back of oxygen. This puts strain on the muscles and causes chronic pain — sometimes injury.

Carpal tunnel syndrome is another common repetitive-use injury. This is often caused by poor hand positioning on the steering wheel, for example holding onto the wheel above shoulder level. This position can cause a lack of circulation to the wrists, hands and fingers. Combined with steady vibration from an automobile in motion, decreased sensitivity can lead to varying pain such as burning, the sensation of swelling or tingling, and even itching in the palm of the hand or fingers.

### Preventing Pain Through Good Driving Posture and Stretching

Good posture will help alleviate discomfort, pain and repetitive injury. Try to follow these guidelines when you're in the car:

- Sit with your knees level to hips and feet flat on the floor.
- Don't grip the steering wheel too tightly.
- Use back support such as a lumbar roll if your car's seat doesn't have good support.
- Do not multi-task while driving, like carry on a conversation while clenching your cell phone between your ear and shoulder; this causes undue strain on the neck, not to mention can be dangerous.
- Don't twist at the waist or reach across the car for items — like in the back seat.
- Use arm rests to support your elbows.
- Don't excessively recline your seat or lean to the passenger side — this results in excessive bending of the head and neck.
- When purchasing a new car — drive it for at least a 20-minute stretch to make sure you're comfortable and, if you can, buy a car with independent height and tilt adjustments of the seat and steering wheel.
- If you are prone to back or neck pain, plan to stop briefly every 30 minutes or so during prolonged travel to get out of the vehicle and stretch.

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Stretching also has long been proven to decrease the risk of injury. While parked, stopped or idling at the stoplight, remember these simple stretching tips to alleviate and prevent discomfort:

- Pull one arm across your chest to the other side — hold with opposite arm for several seconds. Repeat on the other side.
- Alternately create a fist then stretch your fingers as much as you can.
- Practice joint rotation in a slow and deliberate circular motion with toes, feet, hands, fingers, shoulders and neck.
- Stretch legs out, keep feet on the floor and bend your ankles to point feet toward you.
- Lower your head so your ear almost touches one shoulder and lower the opposite shoulder at the same time — hold for a few seconds, then repeat on the other side.
- Above all else, do not perform any stretches that cause you pain.

### Should You See a Doctor?

To determine if you need to seek professional medical assistance, ask yourself the following:

- Have you been in pain for six months or longer?
- Does the pain radiate into your arms or legs?
- Have you been taking pain-relieving medications (over the counter or prescription) every day to help with pain?
- Does your pain limit your daily activities?
- Have you noticed that medications no longer provide relief, or are you experiencing unwanted side effects?

If you've answered yes to any of these questions, contact your doctor or the Center for Pain Management. Physicians with specialized qualifications in pain medicine can help you prevent further injury, assess the severity of your injury and prescribe a treatment plan to help you manage your pain.

So the next time you hop in the car, be conscientious of your posture. Soon enough, you'll see the checkered flag waving for pain relief.



### About the Author

**Amy Rice, MSPT**, brings more than 15 years experience in the pain management industry to her role as administrator of the Center for Pain Management, located in Indianapolis. She is a Fellow of the American Academy of Pain Management, a licensed physical therapist and holds bachelor degrees in biology and music performance. As administrator, Amy manages day-to-day operations of the Center's medical practice and surgery center. The Center for Pain Management's team of board-certified pain physicians, psychologists, licensed physical therapists and supporting professional staff offers the most comprehensive, evidence-based diagnostic and treatment programs available to pain patients in Central Indiana. Expert services include a balanced mix of modalities including interventional treatments such as facet, spine or epidural injections or nerve blocks; and spinal cord stimulation, medication management, physical therapy and psychological evaluation. For more information, call 317-706-PAIN or e-mail [arice@indypain.com](mailto:arice@indypain.com).