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Some minor adjustments to your vehicle can lessen the pain of a long drive

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CALGARY HERALD

If you're heading out of town this long weekend, chances are you'll be driving. Chances also are the way you sit in your car — especially on long drives — will have a noticeable impact on your body. Everything from how your mirrors are set up to where you put your hands on the wheel play a role in how you'll feel

when you eventually step out of your car. "Most people drive, and so many people feel pain from driving," says Shona Anderson, a certified Canadian professional ergonomist and owner of Calgary's Anderson Ergonomics Consulting Inc. "I do a lot of ergonomics for driving in industry — oil companies, for example. They not-

oriously have back and shoulder pain," she says. "I've even had people call me because they've gotten a new vehicle and need help because it's just not comfortable." Even if you don't drive for a living, logging long hours in the car on an extended drive can cause muscle tension and soreness, especially in the upper back and shoulders.

To make sure you have the right setup when you hit the road this weekend, Anderson provides the following tips. Follow the instructions, which range from before you start driving to once you arrive at your destination, to give your body the best chance at feeling good this long weekend. After all, who wants to be sore for a weekend in the sun?



Tips put health
in driver's seat

Driving in comfort

1 Before you get into the car, you should always take your wallet out of your back pocket. "Putting a wallet in the back pocket puts a lot of pressure on the lower back because it raises one side of the pelvis and puts it in a bit of a twist," says Anderson.

2 Now that you're sitting, check to see where your knees are in relation to your hips. "Ideally, people's knees would be at the same level of their hips or slightly lower," says Anderson. "As soon as the knees are above the hips, it tends to flatten out the lower back and puts pressure on the discs in the lower back. It can cause some nerve pain or tightening of the muscles in the pelvis and the butt, and causes the shoulders to roll forward."

This is an easy fix if you have a power seat that lets you adjust your seat height and tilt. But if you don't, buy a small wedge, available at home care stores such as Shoppers Drug Mart, to put on your seat.

"Just watch your head doesn't

hit the roof and doesn't come above the head rest. The middle of the head rest should hit the middle of your head. If you're too high," says Anderson, "you would whip your neck back on the head rest in an accident and that would be very dangerous."

3 Time to adjust your back support. Anderson says lower back support in cars can be dismal. "The backrest tends to be kind of flat and it drops the pelvis back when people sit in it. As a result, the upper body sort of curls forward and people get back pain," she says.

If your car doesn't have good lower back support, use an external lumbar support. Roll up a sweater or towel, for example, and put it behind your lower back. Or, consider buying a ready-made support. Anderson recommends avoiding the full circle, tube-shaped supports and going for the half-tube ones instead.

"A full circle provides too much support and it actually pushes the back too far forward."

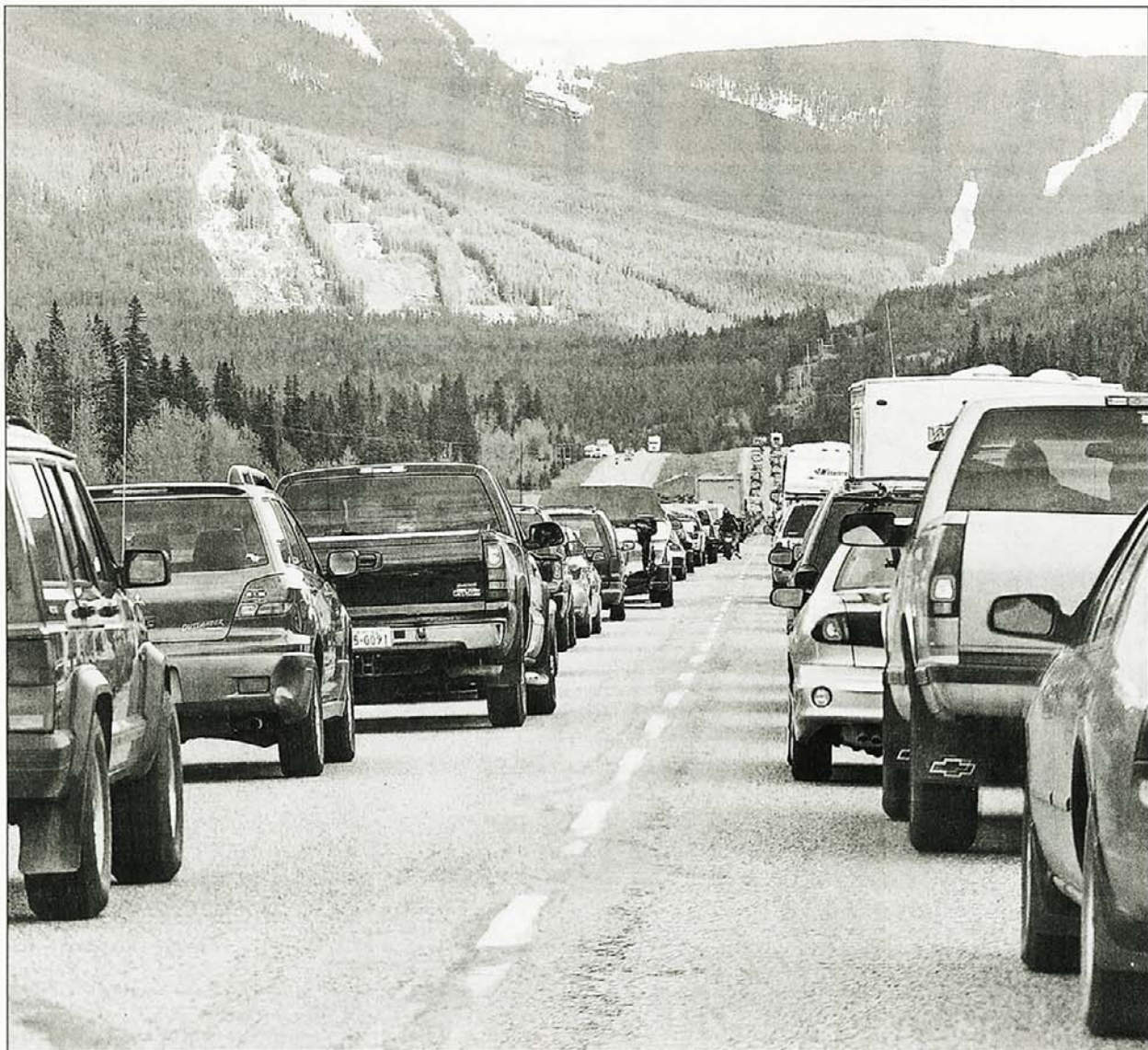
She stresses that if your seat already has lower back support, you won't need the added one. Sit straight in your chair — you want to have both your lower and upper back supported.

4 Adjust your steering wheel. Anderson says a common problem is that tall people will push their seats back to give their legs room, but then they drive with their arms outstretched to meet the wheel.

"It puts a lot of stress on the shoulders and upper back when you do that," she says.

"Sometimes just tilting the steering wheel down will help, because your hands aren't so high. The ideal position is to drive with your elbows as close to your hips as you can." And while you may have learned to drive with your hands at the 10 and 2 o'clock positions, Anderson says keeping them at 3 and 9 o'clock is easier on your body because your arms are lower.

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If you're planning on doing a long drive this holiday weekend, or even sometime in the near future, consider making adjust-

FROM CI DRIVING: Be comfy on long trips

■ Sit up straight and adjust your mirrors. "You should sit up tall to see through them," says Anderson.

"Don't slouch as you're driving." Slouching puts strain on your upper back and shoulders, leading to pain. To ease the tension in those areas, as well, remember to use your arm rest once in a while, especially during a long drive.

"Even if you just support your elbow on the arm rest for a bit, that will allow the shoulders and the upper back to relax."

■ Pay attention to the types of roads you're on. People who drive a lot on country roads (or on icy or snowy roads during the winter) are at greater risk of muscle fatigue.

"The vibration of the wheels on the roads tends to be at the body's resonant frequency," says Anderson.

And what does that mean? "It vibrates at such a speed that we notice it and it's at the right amount to cause us injury. Vibration

just sort of jams the discs down and vibrates the vertebrae."

If you drive for a living, invest in an air ride seat that actually dampen the vibration. But if you're just heading out of town this weekend and find yourself on a bumpy gravel road, slow down. "That will help to alleviate some of that vibration and strain on the body," says Anderson.

■ Don't rest your wrists on top of the steering wheel. "That puts a lot of pressure on the wrists," says Anderson, adding that's where your nerves pass through.

You want to protect them from vibration and strain. "If your arms are tired, bring your elbows down low and your hands to the 5 and 7 o'clock position for a short period of time."

■ Change your position throughout a long drive to get rid of muscle fatigue. Power seats come in handy, because you can tilt your seat forward a little bit so that your

hips are slightly higher.

"If you don't change your position, your muscles will get tight and your blood will start to pool," says Anderson. "If you can change slightly, you'll get rid of some of those pressure points so you don't have so much muscle fatigue."

■ Finally, stretch. While you're driving, try this simple one: hold onto the steering wheel and roll your upper back like a cat. Then extend your spine by pushing your chest and stomach forward.

"That's a good one for the upper back," says Anderson.

Also, try to get out of your vehicle as often as you can on a long drive to walk around and stretch.

An easy stretch is the back extension: place your hands on your hips and gently bend backwards.