



PREVENTING & TREATING LOW BACK PAIN



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WHAT CARE FEELS LIKE.



AN INTRODUCTION TO LOW BACK PAIN

Low back pain is the number two reason that Americans see a health care practitioner — second only to colds and flu. While most people have back pain at some time in their lives, factors such as age, weight, heredity and work activities all affect the chance of experiencing back pain.

As with most health issues, taking steps to prevent low back pain is very important. Exercising, staying at a healthy weight and lifting heavy objects the right way — by always bending at the knees — can help prevent low back pain.

If you have low back pain, chances are you will feel better within one week. After another four to six weeks, the back pain should be completely gone. Because of this pattern of healing, your doctor probably will not order any tests at your first office visit, unless you have certain symptoms or there are specific findings during your exam.

CAUSES OF BACK PAIN

There are many causes of back pain. The most common are:

- Bulging discs
- Pinched nerves
- Sciatica (a painful nerve condition going from the lower back through the hips)
- Arthritis (joint swelling)
- Muscle spasms and strains

Poor posture, tight muscles and spine alignment problems

can also cause back pain. More serious conditions such as osteoporosis (brittle bones), broken bones, tumors and infections are much less common. Often, the exact cause of back pain is never learned.

WHEN TO SEE YOUR DOCTOR

It's time to visit your doctor if you have:

- Numbness or tingling in your back, legs or arms
- Pain after a fall
- Very bad pain
- Pain with fever, trouble passing urine or weight loss for no reason



Your doctor may send you to a physical therapist, prescribe a muscle relaxer or recommend steroid shots to help with pain. If this doesn't help, your doctor may recommend X-rays, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), computed tomography (CT) scans or blood tests to find the reason for your pain. While the need for surgery is rare, it might be an option if you suffer from a herniated disk (when a disk breaks open and affects nearby nerves in lower back), a fracture in the spine or degenerative disease (normal changes in your spinal disks as you age).

TIPS FOR A HEALTHIER BACK

There are a number of things you can do to improve the strength and condition of your back:

- Start a program of regular exercises. Ask your doctor for a list of low-impact exercises that are good for people your age. Speed walking, swimming or stationary bike riding can increase your muscle strength and ability to move with ease. Yoga can also help stretch and make your muscles stronger, and improve posture. Don't slouch when standing or sitting. When standing, keep your weight equally distributed on both feet.
- At home or work, make sure your work surface is at a comfortable height for you. Sit in a chair with good lower back support that is well-positioned and at the right height for the task you are doing.
- Wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes.
- Sleep on your side to reduce any curve in your spine. Always sleep on a firm surface.
- Don't try to lift objects that are too heavy for you.
- Eat right to reduce or keep off extra weight, especially weight around the waistline that can strain lower back muscles.
- If you smoke, quit. Smoking reduces blood flow to the lower spine and causes the spinal discs to weaken.



TREATING BACK PAIN

The good news is that most back problems get better in a few days or weeks. A little rest and over-the-counter pain medicine can help the process. Then, it's a good idea to slowly start your daily activities again.

If you have back pain, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) suggests these steps you can take to feel better now:

- Take medicine. A number of over-the-counter drugs, such as acetaminophen, aspirin and ibuprofen reduce pain and swelling. Topical painkillers that you put on the skin over the affected area may also give you relief.
- If you were hurt, put a cold pack or compress on the tender spot several times a day for up to 20 minutes. After two to three days of cold treatment, apply heat for short periods to relax muscles and increase blood flow.
- Change the way you move. Pay attention to the way you lift things and adjust yourself to reduce the strain on your back.
- Resist the urge to sit or lie still for more than a day or so after a minor back injury. Stand up and move gently to help mobility.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the Web sites below for more information on preventing and treating back pain:

US National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/007494.htm

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, National Institutes of Health: www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/backpain/backpain.htm

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