

# Low Back Pain

More than 8 out of 10 adults in the United States will have an episode of acute low back pain at some time in their lives. Research shows that many myths or beliefs about back pain are false, and has identified the prevention and treatment options that work best.

## What is acute low back pain and what causes it?

An acute episode of low back pain is sudden and severe. It can be hard to know exactly what causes it. Low back pain usually happens when you strain your muscles by doing something different, like yard work or moving heavy things.

Sometimes, it is caused by hurt ligaments (strong, fibrous tissue) between the bones in your back (vertebra) or in the lower part of your back. Sometimes a cushion in your spine (a disc) can push out and press on a nerve. But most of the time, the cause is not a serious problem and you will be able to do your regular activities again soon.



## Back pain myths

### **Myth 1:** Bed rest is best.

Not true. In fact, research has shown that bed rest for more than a day or two can be harmful. To keep from getting worse, keep moving!

### **Myth 2:** If the pain is bad, there must be spinal damage — or something is out of place.

That's usually not true. Fortunately, your back is blessed with a strong and flexible bony spine that is reinforced by ligaments and surrounded by large, powerful muscles. So it is very difficult to damage the spine or dislocate anything. However, there are times when you should call your doctor (see page 4).

### **Myth 3:** Low back pain always requires special tests and treatments ordered by a doctor.

Not true. Imaging tests, such as x-rays or MRIs, are usually not needed. They may even lead to unnecessary procedures. Your doctor can usually rule out serious causes with a medical history and physical exam.



## What can I do to ease my back pain?

Not all back pain requires a doctor's visit. You can often manage your pain on your own and return to normal activities as soon as you're ready.

Try these suggestions:

- **Keep moving.** It's natural to want to avoid using your back when it hurts. However, for most types of back pain, inactivity — especially bed rest — can slow the healing process and make your muscles weaker, tighter, and more painful. Although you do want to avoid activities that make your pain worse, stay as active as possible.
- **Find a comfortable position.** When you do rest, you may have to experiment with positions to relieve your pain. Try lying on your back with a pillow under your knees or thighs, or on your side with your knees bent and a pillow between your legs.
- **Apply heat or cold.** Cold (an ice pack or bag of frozen peas wrapped in a towel) can reduce pain, while heat (a hot water bottle, heating pad, or warm bath) can loosen tight muscles. Apply ice or heat for 15 to 20 minutes at a time, once each hour. Switch between the two for best results.
- **Try simple pain medicine.** Control your pain with the following over-the-counter medicines:
  - **Anti-inflammatory medications**, such as aspirin, ibuprofen (generic, Advil, Nuprin, or Motrin) or naproxen (Aleve), relieve pain and also help reduce inflammation.
  - **Acetaminophen** (generic, Tylenol, Excedrin) helps relieve pain.

Pain medicine should control the pain enough that you can be active. **If you take medicine for any other medical condition (such as high blood pressure, diabetes, or arthritis), check with your doctor before taking any over-the-counter pain relievers.** Also, be sure to follow the directions on the packaging.

## What can my doctor do?

There is no magic cure for acute back pain. In fact, your doctor may not be able to pinpoint the exact cause of your pain. However, your doctor CAN:

- **Rule out any serious condition.** In most cases, your doctor can rule out serious conditions from a medical history and physical exam alone. Typically, you **do not** need special lab tests, x-rays, or MRIs. In fact, these tests usually don't help. If your doctor does suspect a serious condition, they will refer you to an appropriate medical specialist.
- **Recommend treatments to help control your pain and prevent disability.** Based on the information gathered in your medical history and physical exam, your doctor may provide a range of treatments. The most common treatments include:
  - **Education and activity recommendations.** Your doctor will talk with you about avoiding bed rest, staying active, and practicing good body mechanics.
  - **Medicines for pain relief.** Your doctor may recommend over-the-counter or prescription-strength anti-inflammatory medications (such as ibuprofen or naproxen) or acetaminophen. For more severe cases, you might need to take a short course of muscle relaxers to reduce muscle tension and increase your ability to move. Acute back pain rarely requires treatment with steroids or narcotics.
  - **Referral to a physical therapist.** A physical therapist can create and supervise an individual exercise program to help improve your flexibility and strength. Earlier treatment tends to produce better results than waiting. (If your insurance doesn't cover physical therapy, ask your doctor for exercise recommendations.)

## How can I prevent low back pain?

Here are some things you can do to lower your chances of having problems with your back:

- **Practice good body mechanics.** The term “body mechanics” refers to how you move and hold your body. Developing good habits is one of the most important things you can do to protect yourself from painful back episodes. The table below lists some DOs and DON'Ts for good body mechanics.
- **Get regular exercise.** Regular activity keeps your body strong and flexible and helps support your back. Start and maintain a regular exercise program that includes aerobic training (such as walking, swimming, or cycling) as well as stomach and back strengthening.
- **Manage your weight.** Extra pounds put extra stress on your back and legs. Focus on eating more fruits, vegetables, and low-fat foods. Keep portions small, avoid junk food, and move more.



- **Avoid activities that require heavy lifting or trunk twisting, or that cause your body to vibrate.** These activities can place lots of stress and strain on your back. Always use proper body mechanics.
- **Reduce stress.** Stress has also been shown to affect low back pain. Stress can cause muscular tension and sometimes spasm. Look at ways to reduce or manage the stress in your life.

### Use better body mechanics!

Activity	DO	DON'T
Lifting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lift and carry objects close to your body.</li><li>• Bend your knees as you lift — make your legs do the hard work, not your back.</li><li>• Turn with your feet as you lift.</li><li>• Know your own strength. Only lift as much as you can handle comfortably.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>DON'T</b> lift objects:</li><li>• Away from your body.</li><li>• With arms outstretched.</li><li>• With your legs straight.</li><li>• And twist in one motion.</li><li>• That are too heavy for you.</li></ul>
Sitting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sit in an upright chair with your knees level with your hips. Keep your ears, shoulders, and hips in a vertical line.</li><li>• Sit with a rolled-up towel or other support behind your lower back.</li><li>• Stretch and walk around after 30 minutes of sitting.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Slouch in your chair.</li><li>• Sit without back support.</li><li>• Sit for a long period of time.</li></ul>
Standing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Put one foot on a low box or stool. Switch feet every few minutes.</li><li>• Have your work surface at a comfortable height.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stand for a long period of time without changing position.</li><li>• Use a work surface that is too low (so you have to bend over) or too high (so you raise your shoulders).</li></ul>
Sleeping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use a firm mattress, or put a board under your mattress to add support.</li><li>• Sleep on your back with a pillow under your thighs. Or, sleep on your side with your knees bent and a pillow between your legs.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sleep on a too-soft mattress.</li><li>• Stay in bed too long.</li></ul>

- **Don't smoke or use tobacco.** Studies show that smokers have twice as much back pain as non-smokers. Ask your doctor about these and other resources to help you quit:

- Intermountain's booklet [Quitting Tobacco: Your Journey to Freedom](#)
- [Smokefree.gov](#)  
Tools and tips to help you quit tobacco for good.
- [American Cancer Society](#)  
Quitting smoking or smokeless tobacco.



## When should I get medical help?

See your doctor immediately or go to the nearest emergency room if you have any of these symptoms:

- Difficulty urinating or controlling urine
- Blood in your urine
- Loss of bowel control

Make an appointment to see your doctor if you develop any of these symptoms:

- Sudden, severe pain
- Severe back pain that gets worse over several weeks instead of getting better
- Back pain that lasts longer than 8 weeks or returns regularly
- Numbness or weakness in your legs
- Fever of 101° F (38.3° C) or higher

## Keep track of what helps the pain

### What makes my back pain BETTER:

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### What makes my back pain WORSE:

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