
Caring for Your Back

Most adults have low back pain at some time in their lives. While some cases are from disease or injury, most are strains caused by lifting improperly, sitting awkwardly, wearing high heels, and poor posture. Stress, excess weight, and poor physical condition increase your risk and recovery time for low back problems.

Although low back pain can limit your activities, it's rarely associated with dangerous medical conditions. Use this guide along with your health care provider's advice to manage your back pain and return to your regular activities.

Relieving Symptoms

Your health care provider probably has recommended that you take anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen, acetaminophen, or aspirin to reduce pain and immobility. These over-the-counter remedies are usually quite effective and may have fewer side effects than prescription medication.

Additional practices may help you return to your normal activities, for instance:

- Apply cold packs for 5-10 minutes at 30-minute intervals
- Do low-stress exercises, such as walking or swimming. Start slowly and gradually build up the speed and length of time you exercise
- Avoid strenuous activity, lifting, bending, or twisting
- Avoid prolonged bed rest
- Wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes
- Practice correct posture

Remember, mild discomfort as you return to normal activity is common and does not mean you are hurting yourself. If you have considerable pain, contact your doctor.

As you recover, begin a regular exercise program that your physician has approved. In addition to strengthening bones, tendons, ligaments, and muscles in the back and improving muscle control and coordination, regular exercise will improve your general health.

Good Posture

Standing/Walking:

- Stand erect with your chin in, head up, and back straight
- Keep your knees slightly bent
- Regularly switch your purse or briefcase from one side of your body to the other

Sitting:

- Make sure your work surface is at a comfortable height
- Use a chair that supports your lower back
- Sit tall with your hips pushed back in the chair
- Use a small footrest to raise the knees higher than the hip
- Don't cross your legs, or cross at the ankles only
- Use a headset or speaker phone instead of cradling the phone between your ear and shoulder

Lifting:

- Bend your knees instead of bending at the waist
- Keep your buttocks low and your head up
- Use your leg muscles to provide the force
- Hold objects close to your body, and keep your back straight
- Lift objects only chest high
- Pivot your body using your feet and legs rather than twisting your back



Driving:

- Put a small pillow behind the small of your back
- Stop frequently on long trips to stretch and walk around

Sleeping:

- Use a firm mattress, or place a plywood board underneath the mattress
- Place a small pillow under your knees if you sleep on your back, or sleep on your side with your knees bent and a pillow between them
- Avoid sleeping on your stomach

Stretching Exercise:

- Sit on the floor with legs tucked underneath you
- Gently bend over from the waist until your chest touches your knees
- Hold for 10 seconds
- Repeat 2-3 times
- Don't bounce or jerk during movement



Danger Signals

Most patients with acute low back problems recover on their own within a few days to a few weeks. *However, you should call your health care provider immediately if your back pain is severe or is accompanied by a high fever, or if you have numbness or weakness in your lower body, rapid weight loss, or problems controlling your bowel or bladder.*