

LOW BACK PAIN

Low back pain is one of the most common disorders in the United States. About 80 percent of people have at least one episode of low back pain during their lifetime.

Factors that increase the risk of developing low back pain include smoking, obesity, older age, female gender, physically strenuous work, sedentary work, a stressful job, job dissatisfaction and psychological factors such as anxiety or depression.

LOW BACK PAIN SYMPTOMS

Radiculopathy — A common feature of low back pain is radiculopathy, which occurs when a nerve root is irritated by a protruding disc or arthritis of the spine. Radiculopathies usually cause radiating pain, numbness, tingling, or muscle weakness in the specific areas related to the affected nerve root, usually the lower leg. Most people with these conditions improve with limited or no treatment, described below.

Sciatica — Sciatica refers to the most common symptom of radiculopathy. It is a pain that occurs when one of the five spinal nerve roots, which are branches of the sciatic nerve, is irritated, causing a sharp or burning pain that extends down the back or side of the thigh, usually to the foot or ankle. You may also feel numbness or tingling. Occasionally, the sciatica may also be associated with muscle weakness in the leg or the foot. If a disc is herniated, sciatic pain often increases with coughing, sneezing, or bearing down.

Neurogenic claudication — Neurogenic claudication is a type of pain that can occur when the spinal cord is compressed due to narrowing of the spinal canal from arthritis or other causes. The pain runs down the back to the buttocks, thighs, and lower legs, often involving both sides of the body. This may cause limping and weakness in the legs. Pain usually gets worse when extending the lower spine (eg, when standing or walking), and gets better when flexing the spine by sitting, stooping, or leaning forward.

LOW BACK PAIN TREATMENT

Unless low back pain is caused by a serious medical condition, a rapid recovery is expected, even if there is a bulging or herniated disc. The body breaks down bulging discs, taking pressure off the nerve. Care of an attack of low back pain includes several simple elements.

Remaining active — Many people are afraid that they will hurt their back further or delay recovery by remaining active. However, remaining active is one of the best things you can do for your back. In fact, prolonged bed rest is not recommended. Studies have shown that people with low back pain recover faster when they remain active. Movement helps to relieve muscle spasms and prevents loss of muscle strength.

Although high-impact activities should be avoided, it is fine to continue doing regular day-to-day activities and light exercises, such as walking. If certain activities cause the back to hurt too much, it is fine to stop that activity and try another.

If back pain is severe, bedrest may be necessary for a short period of time, generally no more than one day. When in bed, the most comfortable position may be to lie on the back with a pillow behind the knees and the head and shoulders elevated, or to lie on the side with the upper knee bent and a pillow between the knees.

Heat — Using a heating pad can help with low back pain during the first few weeks. It is not clear if cold packs help as well.



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Work — Most experts recommend that people with low back pain continue to work so long as it is possible to avoid prolonged standing or sitting, heavy lifting, and twisting. Some people need to stay home from work if their occupation does not allow them to sit or stand comfortably. While standing at work, stepping on a block of wood with one foot (and periodically alternating the foot on the block) may be helpful.

Pain medications — Take a pain medication such as aspirin, acetaminophen (Tylenol), or ibuprofen (eg, Advil) or naproxen (Aleve).

If medication is needed, it is usually more effective to take a dose on a regular basis for three to five days, rather than using the medication only when the pain becomes unbearable.

Muscle relaxants (eg, cyclobenzaprine, Flexeril) are available by prescription, but can cause drowsiness and are probably no better than ibuprofen in relieving pain. Muscle relaxants may be helpful before bedtime when used for a short time. People who need to be alert, such as while driving or operating machinery, should not use muscle relaxants.

Exercise — A program of exercises can help to increase back flexibility and strengthen the muscles that support the back. Although starting back exercises or stretching immediately after a new episode of low back pain might temporarily increase the pain, the exercise may reduce the total duration of pain and prevent recurrent episodes.

Recommended activities include those that involve strengthening and stretching, such as walking, swimming, use of a stationary bicycle, and low-impact aerobics. Avoid activities that involve twisting, bending, are high impact, or that make the back hurt more. Some specific exercises may help strengthen the muscles of the lower back. People with frequent episodes of low back pain should continue these exercises indefinitely to prevent new episodes.

Physical therapy — If back pain has been present for more than 4 to 6 weeks, a healthcare provider may recommend working with a physical therapist to develop a formal exercise program. Exercise programs may involve stretching, flexion and extension exercises, strengthening, aerobic activity, general overall fitness, or some combination of these components. The physical therapist may directly supervise exercise sessions, or can teach the person to perform the exercise program at home.

PREVENTING LOW BACK PAIN

There are a number of ways to prevent low back pain from returning. Perhaps the most important are exercise and staying active. Regular exercise that improves cardiovascular fitness can be combined with specific exercises to strengthen the muscles of the hips and torso. The abdominal muscles are particularly important in supporting the lower back and preventing back pain. It is also important to avoid activities that involve repetitive bending or twisting and high-impact activities that increase stress in the spine.

Bend and lift correctly — People with low back pain should learn the right way to bend and lift. As an example, lifting should always be done with the knees bent and the abdominal muscles tightened to avoid straining the weaker muscles in the lower back.

Take a break — People who sit or stand for long periods should change positions often and use a chair with appropriate support for the back. An office chair should be readjusted several times throughout the day to avoid sitting in the same position. Taking brief but frequent breaks to walk around will also prevent pain due to prolonged sitting or standing. People who stand in place for long periods can try placing a block of wood on the floor, stepping up and down every few minutes.