

BACK PAIN

Most low back pain is caused by mechanical problems with the joints or muscles of the back. Your clinician will help rule out more serious disorders of internal organs, which can also cause back pain.

Common Causes of Low Back Pain

Acute back strain: Pain in a specific back muscle that is overstretched by abnormal posture or sudden movement. The strained muscle is usually tender.

Low back pain syndrome: Recurring low back pain (and often pain in the upper back and neck as well) brought on by poor posture, physical stress, loss of flexibility, and scarring from previous injuries. Most episodes of low back pain are self-limiting. The immediate goals of treatment are prevention of further injury and relief from pain.

Sciatica: Pain radiating down into the leg (usually below the knee) from irritation of the nerve root by bulging of the disk between the bones in the back. Symptoms of sciatica can also be caused by tight muscles or by inflammation of the sciatic nerve.

Self Care

Here are some things you can do for your back:

- Don't do any bending, lifting or twisting while your back is painful; you may make your back worse.
- Try to avoid sitting for long periods if sitting tends to increase your back pain.
- You may use either heat or ice on your back, whichever decreases your symptoms most over the following 2 to 3 hours. For heat, you can purchase an electric heating pad and follow the directions on the package. For ice, place ice cubes in a plastic bag and put the bag in a pillowcase. Apply the heat or ice for 20 minutes, then remove it for at least 20 minutes before reapplying it for another 20 minutes. After that, do not reapply heat or ice for about an hour. Some people prefer to alternate heat and ice.
- Ibuprofen (such as Motrin or Advil) or Naproxen (such as Aleve) can be used to decrease pain and inflammation. Acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) can be taken for pain relief, but does not decrease inflammation. Follow the directions on the bottle. If you experience stomach upset, discontinue use and contact your clinician.
- Your clinician may prescribe medication such as pain relievers and/or muscle relaxants. Take only as directed.
- Bed rest may be necessary for severe back pain. For lying on your side, place a pillow between your knees. If you lie on your back, try placing a pillow under your knees. You can also lie on your stomach if this is the most comfortable position for you.
- See a clinician for severe back pain or pain that does not resolve within a few days.
- Ask your clinician about a referral to **Physical Therapy**. The PT staff will teach you appropriate stretching and strengthening exercises for your back, as well as proper posture and strategies to decrease your back pain. With Physical Therapy intervention, many people can return to their previous level of activity more quickly and avoid the recurrence of back pain.

Exercises

These exercises should decrease your back pain. However, if they make your back pain worse or send pain down your leg, stop the exercises and contact your clinician. Do the exercise on a firm surface. You may want to use a heating pad before the exercises to relax tight muscles. Begin with 5 to 10 repetitions of each exercise and increase as tolerated:

- **Prone on elbows:** Lying face down, push up on your elbows to arch your back. Let your lower back and legs relax as much as you can. Hold this position for 20 to 30 seconds.
- **Prone press-up:** Lying face down, push up with your arms to arch your back, keeping the hips in contact with the floor. Slowly lower your body back to the floor. Go up only as high as you can without pain.
- **Abdominal Bracing:** Lie on your back, with knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Tighten your abdominal muscles by pulling them inward toward your low back. The curve of your low back should straighten. Hold for 5 seconds.

Posture and Precautions

Many low back problems are caused by poor posture, especially when sitting, or by bending or lifting improperly. Here are some tips:

- **Sitting:** sit with your hips all the way back in the chair, and rest your back against the chair's backrest. Try to keep your knees lower than your hips and your feet supported.
- **Sleeping:** A moderately firm mattress with a very firm box spring or board under it is usually best.
- **Standing:** Avoid positions where you are standing bent forward for long periods, even if it's only a little bent over. If you must bend over for a while, straighten up every few minutes and arch your back a few times. If you have to stand for longer periods, use a footrest to help relieve pressure in your low back. Women should note that shoes with moderate heels strain the back less than those with high heels.

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- **Lifting and carrying:** Bend your knees, keeping your torso upright, and use your leg muscles to lift. Bend at the hips and knees, never at the waist. Tighten your abdominal muscles as you lift to stabilize your spine. Do not twist your torso while you are lifting, carrying, or putting down heavy objects. Turn your feet instead. Keep the load close to your body, and don't try to lift objects that are too heavy.
- **Driving:** Sit close enough to the steering wheel while driving so that your legs are not fully extended when you work the pedals. Roll up a towel lengthwise and position it at your belt line in your low back curve and lean back over it. The towel roll should be thick enough to fill in your low back curve comfortably. Using a towel roll can be helpful especially when driving for prolonged periods of time.
- **Working:** If you can, change from one position to another before you feel fatigue. If you work at a desk all day, get up and move around whenever you get the chance. If you stand for long periods, sit down during breaks.
- **Exercise:** Get regular exercise (walking, swimming, etc.) But start slowly to give your muscles a chance to warm up and loosen before attempting anything strenuous.

Please Note:

Consult your clinician if any of the following happens:

- You develop any new, prolonged or more severe symptoms, including dizziness, weakness, numbness, or shooting pains down your leg.
- Your pain is worsening or changing location.
- Symptoms have not improved after 3 days of self-treatment.

Test Results and Advice Nurse

Please call the nurse for test results and advice: 863-4463

Appointments

Appointments can be made online via the UHS website, by phone or in person. If you are unable to keep your appointment, please call and cancel. Otherwise you will be charged for the visit.

To schedule or cancel appointments call 863-0774 or schedule your appointment online through the UHS website

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