

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.
- **Herniated Disc**
Herniated discs can occur from acute injuries as well as routine wear and tear. The pain can be localized or radiate down the course of a nerve if the disc is pressing on one. Herniated discs will usually heal with time and the pain will usually resolve although surgery is occasionally necessary.

Self Care

- Most back pain will last only a few days and can resolve with self-care. It can however last for weeks and become chronic.
- Consider **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.
- 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. Apply the heat or ice for 20 minutes, 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. Follow the directions on the bottle. If you experience stomach upset, discontinue use and contact your clinician. Acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) can be taken for pain relief and causes less stomach upset, but does not decrease inflammation.
- 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 your health care provider if you:

- Have numbness or weakness into your legs
- Have problems with bowel or bladder control
- Have a fever or feel sick in general
- Have a history of cancer or osteoporosis
- Have frequent, bloody or painful urination
- Your pain does not resolve in a week or so
- Take steroid medication, such as prednisone, on a regular basis
- Have diabetes or a medical problem that weakens your immune system
- Have unexplained weight loss

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What can I do to help prevent back pain?

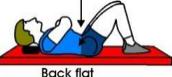
Posture and Precautions

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. 
- **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.

Exercises

Exercises that help strengthen the back and abdominal muscles may be the most effective way to speed your recovery. In addition to the exercises below, back-healthy activities such as swimming, walking or movement therapy can help improve coordination, posture, and balance. Any mild discomfort felt at the start of these exercises should disappear as muscles become stronger. If the pain is more than mild and lasts longer than 15 minutes, stop and consult a clinician. Do the exercise on a firm surface. You may want to use a heating pad before the exercise 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. 

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In an emergency go to Mount Nittany Medical Center or call 911 for an ambulance.

Test Results and Advice Nurse

Send secure message to advice nurse via the UHS website or call 814- 863-4463.

Appointments

Appointments can be made online via the UHS website, by phone 814-863-0774, or in person. If you are unable to keep your appointment, please call or go online to cancel. Otherwise you will be charged for the visit.

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