

# WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT LOW BACK PAIN

## What Is Low Back Pain?

Many people have pain and stiffness in their lower back at some point. Most feel better within 4 weeks, but pain can persist or come and go over months or years.

## What Causes It?

A cause is usually not found, but specific reasons may include:

- Bulging or rupturing of the disks that cushion the bones in your spine
- Narrowing of the open spaces in your spine (spinal stenosis)

Because back pain from a variety of sources often follows a similar pattern, these are often treated similarly unless the pain does not improve.

Low back pain can rarely be caused by a serious condition, such as cancer, infection, rheumatologic disease, or compression of the area below the end of the spinal cord. Signs or symptoms of these may include:

- Numbness in the leg, foot, groin, or rectal area
- Loss of bowel or bladder control
- Fever
- Recent infection or history of intravenous drug use
- Weight loss
- Current or past cancer
- Trauma
- Pain that is not relieved by lying down or does not improve after 3 to 4 weeks

## Can It Be Prevented?

Risk factors for low back pain include:

- Obesity
- Physical inactivity
- Work that requires heavy lifting, bending, or twisting
- Bad posture
- Stress or depression

A healthy weight and lifestyle, daily physical activity, and good posture and lifting techniques may help prevent low back pain.

## What Are the Symptoms?

Symptoms can range from muscle aches to a shooting, burning, or stabbing feeling. The pain may radiate down your leg or worsen with bending, twisting, lifting, standing, or walking.

Back pain is considered acute when it first starts. Most acute pain resolves within 4 weeks. Pain that lasts beyond 12 weeks is considered chronic and carries risk for long-term pain or decreased functioning. People who have had one pain episode may be at risk for repeated episodes of acute pain.

## How Is It Diagnosed?

- Your doctor will ask you questions about your pain, your medical history, your daily activities, and your mental well-being.



- You will have an examination of your back and legs. Your doctor may ask you to perform certain movements to see how they affect your pain.
- Imaging tests are rarely needed for diagnosis because they usually do not help with treatment.

## How Is It Treated?

- Low back pain usually occurs suddenly and improves within 3 to 4 weeks without treatment.
- Generally, the goal is to manage your pain so that you can maintain physical function while symptoms improve over time. Complete resolution of your pain may not be possible.
- Avoid bed rest or inactivity and try to keep doing normal everyday activities.
- Heat may relax your back muscles and decrease pain. Alternative therapies, such as massage, chiropractic care, and acupuncture, may also help.
- Psychological therapy (cognitive behavioral therapy) or mindfulness-based stress reduction may improve pain and function.
- If these do not help, ask your doctor about the risks and benefits of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications (such as ibuprofen or naproxen), a muscle relaxant, or a specific type of antidepressant called duloxetine.
- Opioid medications should usually be avoided because anti-inflammatory medications are as effective and have fewer harms.
- Surgery is rarely needed.
- Various exercise programs may prevent pain from returning. You should pursue one that you enjoy and can stick with, maintain a healthy weight, and take care of your mental well-being with healthy coping strategies.

## Questions for My Doctor

- What signs or symptoms could indicate a more serious condition?
- Are there activities I should avoid?
- Should I take medicine for my pain?
- When should I follow up with you if the pain doesn't go away?
- Are there alternative therapies that may help?
- Will an imaging test change my treatment?
- Are there exercises I can do to prevent future back pain?

## For More Information



**National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke**  
[www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/Patient-Caregiver-Education/Fact-Sheets/Low-Back-Pain-Fact-Sheet](http://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/Patient-Caregiver-Education/Fact-Sheets/Low-Back-Pain-Fact-Sheet)

**MedlinePlus**  
<https://medlineplus.gov/backpain.html>