

Focus on life. Focus on health. *Stay focused.*



Achieve Your Best Health
Health Coaching for Back Care



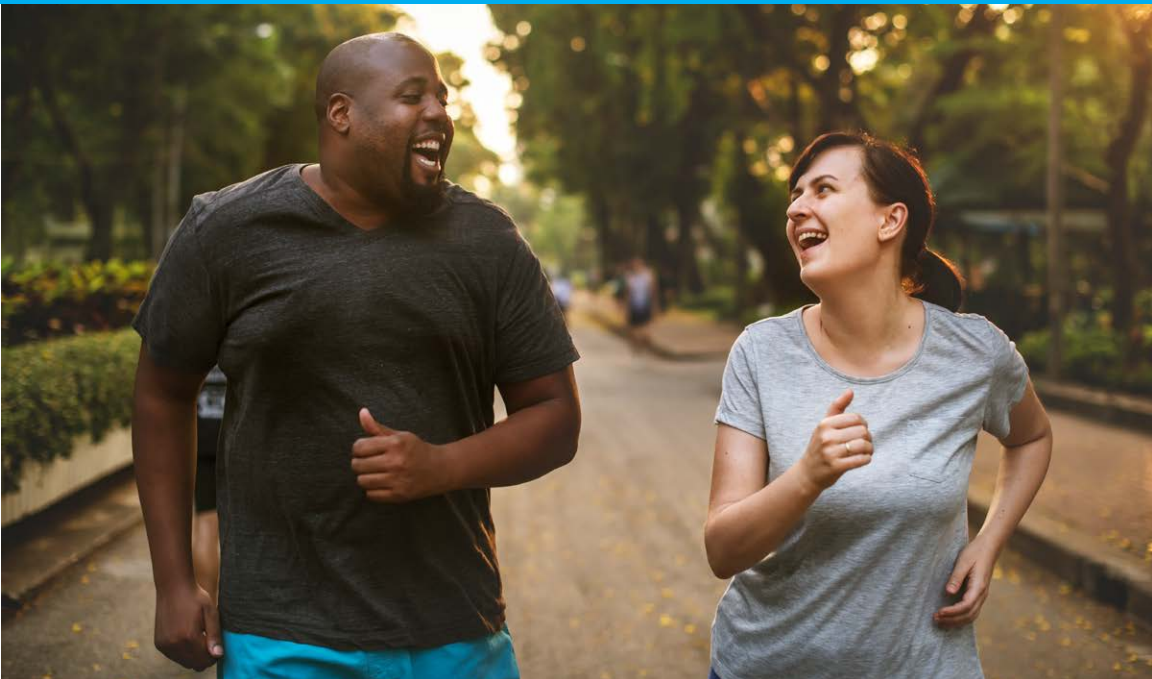
Blue OptionSM

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1	Medical treatment	18
Back care basics	2	Medications.....	18
Understanding your back.....	2	Important questions to ask your health care provider	19
Who gets back pain?.....	2	Other treatments	19
Types of back pain	3	Surgical procedures.....	20
Assessing your back pain	6	Partnering with your health care team.....	22
Do I need diagnostic imaging for my back pain?.....	7	When to call your health care provider	23
Self-care and prevention	8	Maintaining a healthy back	24
Body mechanics	8	Simple tips.....	24
Daily back care exercises	11	Get regular preventive exams	24
Cold and heat therapy	13	Resources	25
Creams and lotions.....	13		
Staying active	14		
Maintaining a healthy weight	15		
Stress management.....	16		

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Introduction

Congratulations! By opening this guide, you are one step closer to having a strong and healthy back. The sooner you take action to care for your back, the sooner you will experience the rewards.

Low back pain is a common problem. It can disrupt every aspect of your life – from work and daily activities to getting a good night’s sleep. According to the National Institutes of Health, it is the most common cause of job-related disability and a leading cause of missed work. This guide will teach you how to prevent low back pain through strengthening and stretching exercises, correct posture, weight management and proper lifting techniques. You will also learn about effective pain management skills and treatment options. As you begin this journey, it’s important that you communicate your needs and concerns with your health care provider. Partnering closely with your provider is a critical step to control and avoid complications from low back pain. Let’s begin!

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Back Care Basics

Understanding your back

Your spine starts at the base of your skull and extends all the way down to your tailbone. It is made up of 33 bones called vertebrae that protect your spinal cord, the main pathway for the central nervous system. The back is also made up of 31 pairs of nerves, 40 muscles, and many ligaments, tendons and discs. The vertebrae are stacked on top of each other. They give the back its structure and support its movement. Even a minor injury to the bones, muscles, ligaments or tendons that make up and surround the spine can cause pain. So what does your back do exactly? One of its main functions is to help you balance. The muscles surrounding the spine give you strength to stand, move and lift. Another function is to protect the spinal cord, a thick band of nerves that controls movement from the neck down. Finally, the back and spine are natural shock absorbers. Your back absorbs most of the impact from your body weight and other loads you may carry. The low back is most susceptible to injury because of the force and frequent motion that it undergoes.

Who gets back pain?

Back pain is the second most common reason for all doctors' visits in the United States. About 80 percent of Americans will experience low back pain at some point. While back pain may be due to an accident or injury, it is often due to lifestyle factors like lack of exercise, poor posture, improper lifting, harmful sleeping positions, being overweight and even depression. It occurs equally in men and women. Young people tend to have short episodes of back pain that resolve quickly, while older people are more likely to have chronic (long-term) back pain. People with manual jobs are more likely to have back pain, as well as people who have jobs that require a lot of driving or sitting. The good news is that 90 percent of people with back pain get better with proper self-care and pain management.



Types of back pain

Back pain can be nerve-related, which includes shooting or numbing pain. It can also be muscle-related – involving dull, achy pain or muscle spasms. The exact cause of back pain is different for every person and is commonly unknown. There are two basic types of back pain: chronic or long-term back pain, and acute or short-term back pain. Chronic back pain requires ongoing management, while acute back pain typically resolves quickly.

Chronic low back pain

Chronic back pain may require medical treatment. It is recurring pain that lasts longer than three months. It can be caused by:

- **Injury**, an accident, a fall, a strenuous sport or over-exercising can often cause fractures, sprains, strains or spasms. Injuries may also occur from bending or twisting, improper lifting or poor posture. (Back pain due to injury can either be chronic or acute.)

- **Osteoarthritis**, a condition that affects the cartilage, making it compressed and irregular. Bony outgrowths called spurs may form, causing joints to rub against each other. This can be very painful.
- **Osteoporosis** (porous bones), a weakening of the bones caused by a loss of calcium. The amount of calcium in your bones decreases as you age, causing your bones to become weaker and less dense. The bones in your back called vertebrae can also become compressed, causing back pain.
- **Degenerative disk disease**, part of the normal aging process. As you age, your discs become worn, causing the spaces between your vertebrae to narrow. Some people with this disease may also develop a nerve irritation, causing pain in the legs and back. An example of this is a bulged or herniated disc. When this occurs, parts of the disc stick out between your vertebrae and put pressure on a nearby nerve.
- **Fibromyalgia**, including many symptoms such as aching, burning, stiffness and/or discomfort in the muscles, tendons and ligaments. The main symptom is chronic pain or aching all over.
- **Sciatica**, inflammation of the sciatic nerve, a nerve that extends all the way down each of your legs from your buttock to your heel. Sciatica is caused by inflamed or compressed nerves in your low back or buttocks. When this happens, you may feel pain, numbness, tingling or muscle weakness from your back down to your lower leg. These symptoms usually go away naturally. However, it is recommended that you seek care from your health care provider if you experience sciatica.
- **Structural problems**, such as lordosis (when the spine curves inward), scoliosis (when the spine curves sideways) and partial dislocations.

Acute low back pain

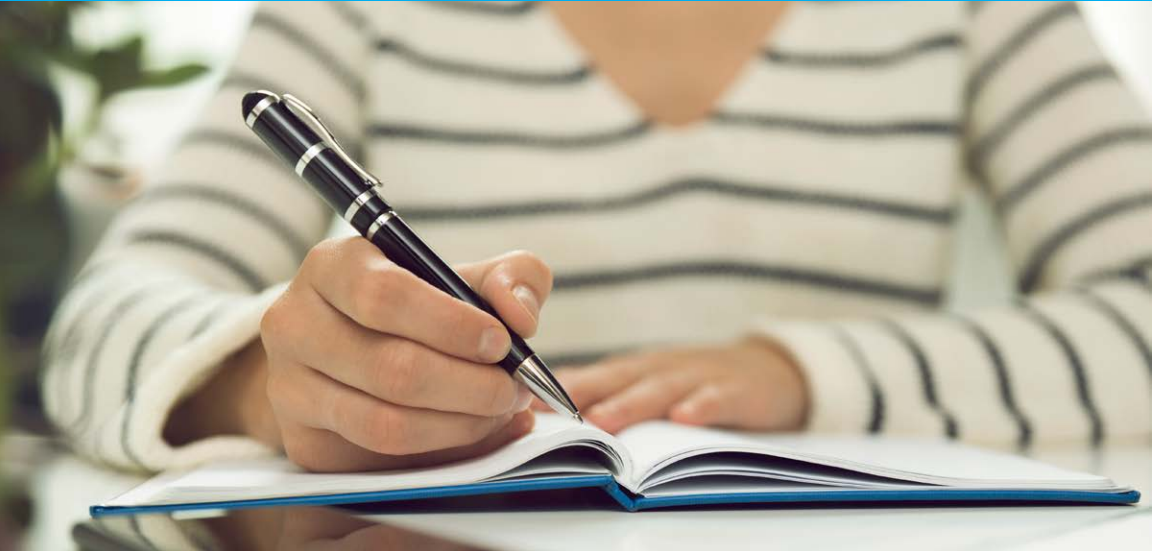
Acute low back pain lasts for less than four weeks. It involves pain or discomfort in the low back. It may even cause pain or numbness that moves down the leg. Most often, acute low back pain subsides on its own in a few days or weeks.

Causes of low back pain include:

- **Injury**, an accident, a fall, a strenuous sport or over-exercising can often cause fractures, sprains, strains or spasms. This may also occur from bending or twisting, improper lifting or poor posture.
- **Infection** of the spine, kidney, bladder or lungs.
- **Kidney stones**.
- **Weight gain** or changes in posture due to pregnancy.

Back pain also can be caused by factors over which people have at least some control. These include:

- **Lack of exercise**
- **Poor posture**
- **Improper lifting techniques**
- **Harmful sleeping positions**
- **Excess body weight**
- **Chronic stress**
- **Weak abdominal and back muscles**
- **Smoking**, as nicotine restricts blood flow to the discs that cushion your vertebrae and increases the rate of degenerative change. Cigarette smoking also reduces calcium absorption and prevents new bone growth, leaving smokers with double the risk of an osteoporotic fracture compared with non-smokers.
- **Depression** can affect healing and be the link to cause of pain. Learning how to change these habits and adopt proper self-management techniques can help you decrease pain, improve function and gain control over your condition in order to return to a pain-free lifestyle.



Assessing your back pain

Back pain can greatly affect your ability to go about daily activities. It's important to take note of ways that your back pain is impacting your daily life. Share information about your back pain with your health care provider so he or she can properly diagnose and treat you. Use the tools below to describe your back pain and symptoms. Share this information with your health care provider.

Make sure to keep records of your back symptoms for your physician. Keep track of the following:

WHAT ARE YOUR SYMPTOMS?	WHERE DO YOU FEEL THIS SYMPTOM?	WHAT MAKES THIS SYMPTOM WORSE?	HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED THIS SYMPTOM IN THE PAST?
Pain Stiffness Numbness Weakness Muscle Spasm Burning Sensation Other	Neck Shoulders Upper Back Lower Back Right Leg Left Leg Hips Buttocks	Sitting Standing Walking Physical Activity Lifting Lying Down Coughing Sneezing	Yes No

Do I need diagnostic imaging for my back pain?

There are many ways to help you manage back pain. For most individuals, back pain quickly improves with physical activity, heat therapy, over-the-counter (OTC) medicines, changing sleep positions, massage, physical therapy and many other alternate treatments. The majority of people are back to their usual activities in 30 days.

For most people with back pain, diagnostic imaging (X-ray, CT scan or MRI) is not necessary. Radiation has harmful effects that can add up over time, so avoid such unnecessary testing when you can. The National Physicians Alliance recommends against imaging for back pain within the first six weeks of pain onset unless certain symptoms are present. The National Physicians Alliance is an independent organization that offers health information you may find helpful. Talk with your doctor first to make sure that diagnostic imaging is right for you.



Self-Care And Prevention

Body mechanics

Your spine has three natural curves that form an “S” shape. It’s important to maintain these curves and keep your back aligned while performing daily activities. This will help to prevent injury.

Sitting

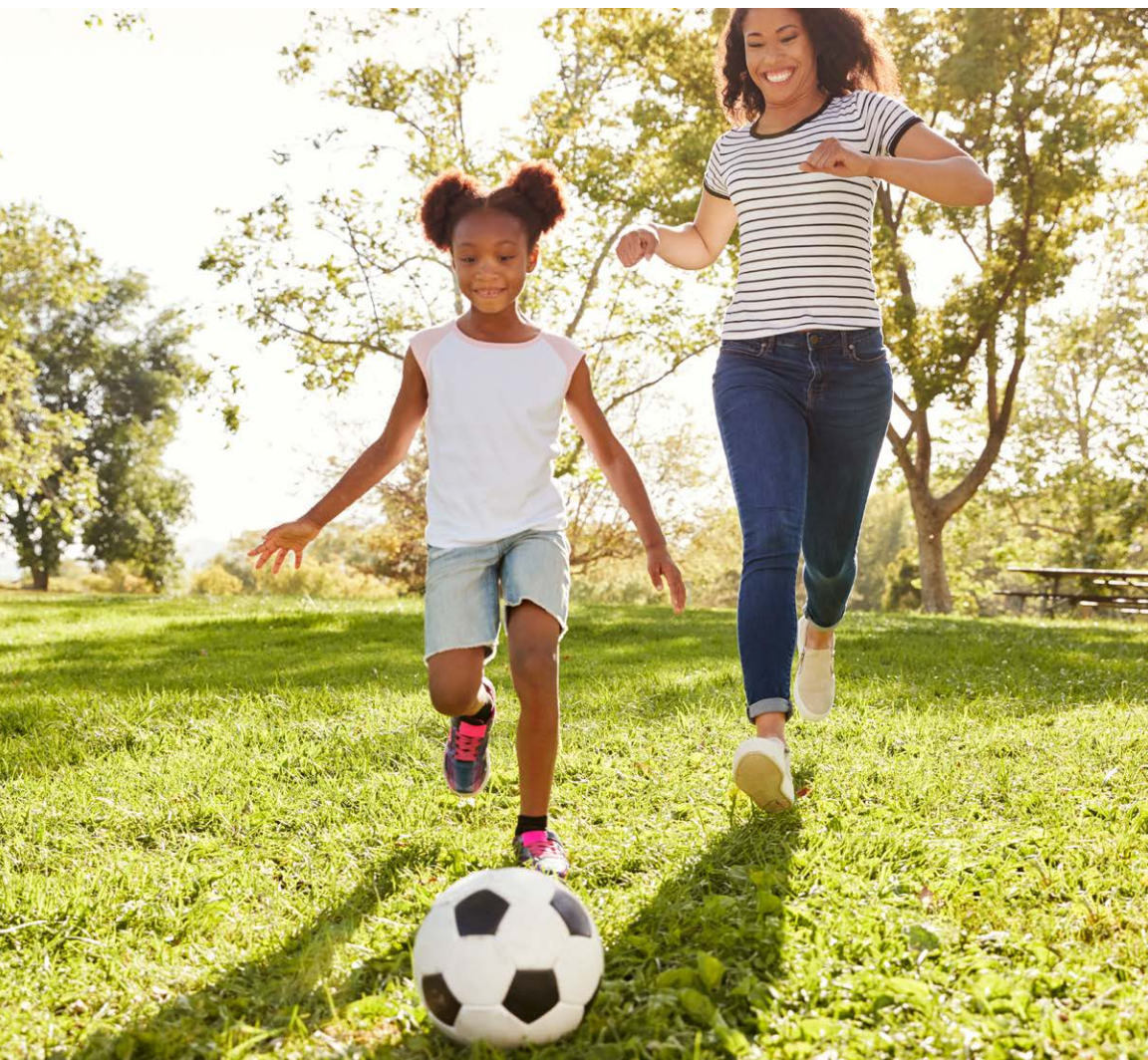
Sitting for too long can put stress on your back. Try to get up, stretch and move around on a regular basis. You should also try changing positions or standing up from time to time. Use an armrest and sit back in your chair to support your lower back. You may also want to add lower back support by using a pillow in the small of your back or lower back. Choose a chair that’s adjustable. Sit straight and avoid twisting your body. Your knees should be level with your hips and bent at a 90-degree angle, with your feet flat on the floor or on a foot rest.

At work, you should adjust your work area to avoid stretching, bending or leaning to reach objects on your desk. When looking at a computer screen, sit up straight and face the screen. Do not lean forward to look at the screen. Position your chair so that it is 18 to 24 inches away from the computer screen. The top of the screen should be in line with your eyes. When typing, your elbows should be bent at a 90-degree angle.

When driving, position your seat so that you can reach the steering wheel and pedals comfortably. Keep your knees level with your hips. You can also use a pillow to support your lower back. Take breaks and stretch often.

Walking or standing

Practice good posture when sitting, but also when standing or walking. Stand up straight with your shoulders rolled back and your chin tucked. Tuck your stomach in so that your pelvis tilts forward slightly. Keep your knees slightly bent. This will keep your back in the proper position. Don't bend over desks or tables for long periods of time. When walking, make sure to wear comfortable shoes with plenty of support. Ask your health care provider about shoe inserts to give you extra support. When walking, let your arms swing back and forth naturally by your side.



Sleeping

When sleeping, you should use a firm mattress to fully support your back.

Sleeping on your back or side is the best position for your back. If you sleep on your back, place a pillow under your knees. If you sleep on your side, bend your knees and place a pillow between them. Avoid sleeping on your stomach, as this puts stress on your neck and back. Do not use large pillows that put your neck in an awkward position.

Housework or yard work

When doing house or yard work, keep your work as close to your body as possible and move your feet if you need to turn. When shoveling, for example, scoop up your load and carry it to where you are piling it instead of throwing it over your shoulder. Also, using tools with bent handles can help reduce back strain. When possible, switch between tasks for different movements. Take breaks often and do gentle stretches.

Lifting

Proper lifting techniques can help prevent back strain. One tip is to plan the lift. Ask yourself, "Where am I moving the object?" "Is the path clear?" "Will I be able to see over the object?" and "How will I hold the object?" These questions can give you an idea if you will need help, such as using a cart or a mechanical aid, asking someone for help, or breaking down a load into smaller loads. When lifting, decide how you want to hold the object, stand in front of the object with feet about shoulder-width apart, bend your knees and squat down while keeping your back straight. Then grasp the object firmly with both hands and use your legs to lift the object. Keep the object as close to your body as possible and move your feet if you need to turn. When you are ready to set the object down, bend at your knees and squat down. Set the object down slowly on a stable surface and make sure it is secure. Avoid lifting heavy objects overhead. Store frequently used items and heavy objects in lower locations.

Daily back care exercises

A strong back reduces the risk of injury and pain. These exercises can help increase your flexibility and build strength to reduce pain and injury. Not all exercises are appropriate for everyone. Talk to your health care provider before doing any of these exercises. Ask him or her to select the appropriate exercises and complete the instructions for each exercise. If you experience pain during any of these exercises, stop right away.

Pelvic tilt

Purpose: To strengthen your core and stretch your hips. Lie on your back with your knees bent and keep your arms at your sides with your feet flat on the floor. Tighten your stomach and buttocks muscles. Tilt your hips upward and press your lower back against the floor. Slowly lower your hips to the floor. Relax your stomach and buttocks muscles.

Hip rolls

Purpose: To stretch your hips. Lie on your back with your knees and your feet flat on the floor. Put your arms straight out to each side and turn your head to the left. Bring your knees up slightly, keeping them bent. Slowly lower both knees to the right and keep both shoulders on the floor and your feet together. Slowly bring your knees back up and repeat.

Cat stretch

Purpose: To stretch your back. Get on your hands and knees. Keep your hands directly below your shoulders and your knees directly under your hips. Bend your back so that your stomach and back sag toward the floor. Arch your back up and away from the floor. Keep your head down. Relax.

Elbow props

Purpose: To stretch and strengthen your back. Lie on your stomach. Keep your arms bent at your sides. Raise your head and chest so that your weight is resting on your forearms. Keep your hips and stomach pressed to the floor. Return to starting position.

Knee-to-chest lift

Purpose: To stretch your back. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Hold one thigh behind the knee and raise the knee up toward your chest. Return to starting position.

Bent-leg situps

Purpose: To strengthen your core. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Cross your arms in front of your chest. Slowly lift your head and shoulders off the floor. Return to starting position slowly.

Spinal stretch

Purpose: To stretch your back. Stand erect and raise both hands over your head. Stretch toward the ceiling. Focus on your upper body. Use your arms, hands and fingers to reach upward as though you were being pulled upward. Keep your feet flat on the floor.

Bridge

Purpose: To strengthen your back and stretch your hips. Lie on your back with your knees bent. With shoulders and head relaxed on the floor, keep stomach muscles tight and raise your hips off the floor. Form a straight line from knees to shoulders. Return to starting position.

Superman

Purpose: To strengthen your back. Lie facedown on the floor or other firm surface. Place a rolled towel or a small pillow under your hips and lower abdomen to support your back. You may want to use a folded towel to cushion your forehead. Cough to tighten your stomach and then raise one arm a few inches off the floor. Return your arm to its starting position. Repeat with your other arm. Then, lift one leg. Avoid arching your back and focus on tightening your stomach. Return the leg to starting position. Repeat with your other leg.



Cold and heat therapy

Applying sources of cold and heat to your back can help to relieve pain, reduce inflammation and swelling, relax muscles and soothe soreness.

Cold therapy should be used right after you start to feel pain. Create an ice pack by filling a plastic bag with ice. Then wrap the plastic bag in a towel or cloth. You should never apply an ice pack directly to your skin. Place the ice pack on the affected area for no more than 20 minutes. Repeat this process several times a day.

Heat therapy should be used a couple of days after the injury or initial pain. Apply a heating pad or hot water bottle wrapped in a towel to the affected area for no more than 20 minutes. Repeat this process two to three times a day.

Creams and lotions

There are pain-relieving creams and lotions available to rub on the skin over painful muscles. Different products have different ingredients, but all are made to relieve pain.

Here are some important instructions when using these products:

- Read the package information and follow directions carefully. If there is an insert, save it to refer to later.
- Never apply products to wounds or damaged skin.
- Do not use them along with a heating pad because it could cause burns.
- Do not use under a tight bandage.
- Wash your hands well after using them. Avoid touching your eyes with the product on your hands.



Staying active

Regular physical activity has many benefits for your back. It helps prevent injury and strengthen the muscles that support your lower back. It also increases your flexibility and relieves muscle tension. Inactivity can lead to weakness, stiffness and slower recovery from back injury. In fact, you should limit bed rest unless you are experiencing severe pain. You should also avoid sitting for long periods of time, as this can worsen back pain. Remaining active will help your body heal faster. Most people with low back pain feel better after doing certain motions. Focus on physical activity that moves you toward a more comfortable position to relieve your back pain. Check with your health care provider before starting physical activity after a back injury, especially if you just had surgery. Start slowly and do not perform any exercises that cause pain or increase your symptoms.

Be sure to practice back safety when recovering from an injury. Here are some tips to keep your back safe during physical activity.

- Once you receive permission from your health care provider to be physically active, you should start slowly and gradually increase your level of intensity.
- Always warm up and cool down before and after exercising. You should also stretch gently before and after exercising.
- Avoid activities that involve twisting, sudden jolts of movement, exaggerated stretching or high impact on your spine.
- Avoid heavy lifting or other strenuous activities while recovering from a back injury.
- Choose back-friendly exercises that won't strain your back or cause further injury. These include swimming, water aerobics, stationary or recumbent bicycling, walking and bicycling.
- Try a yoga or tai chi class.
- If you choose to join a gym, make sure you ask a manager or personal trainer to teach you how to use each piece of equipment to prevent injury.
- When exercising, wear shoes that fit well and have plenty of support.

Maintaining a healthy weight

Being overweight is a common cause of low back pain. It puts extra pressure on the vertebrae, muscles, discs and ligaments in the back. This means a greater risk for injury and pain. Maintaining a healthy weight helps to prevent back pain. It also has many other benefits, including a lower risk for heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer. It can also improve your cholesterol levels, lower your blood pressure and better control your blood sugar. Not to mention, it also helps you look and feel great! Practicing healthy habits like eating healthy and being physically active will help you to reach and stay at a healthy weight. Learn more at www.ChooseMyPlate.gov.

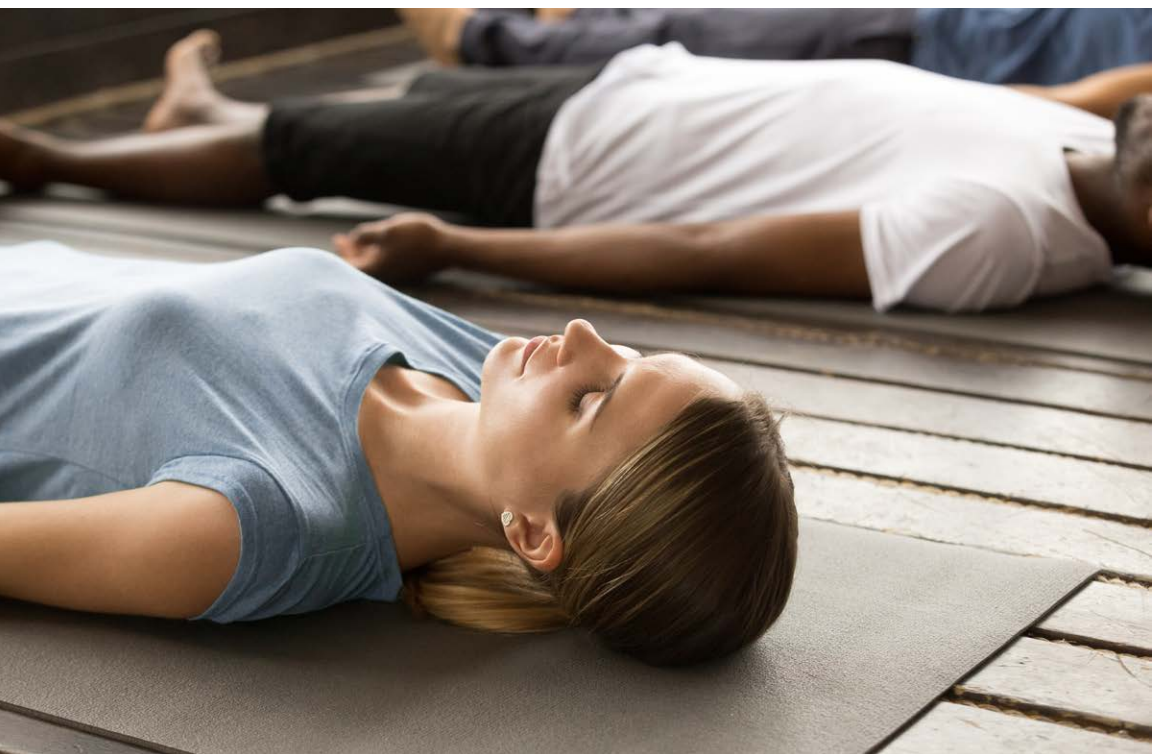
Stress management

Long-term stress can have a significant impact on your health. It also can be a major contributor to back pain. Chronic stress may cause you to carry tension in certain areas of your body, including the neck, shoulders and back. This can lead to back pain and worsen back pain that already exists. The good news is, stress is controllable. It's important that you learn to manage it.

Stress-relief strategies

Several stress-relief strategies can be used in the midst of stressful situations to relieve muscle tension and slow down your heart rate, blood pressure and breathing. Following are a few relaxation techniques you can use to manage your stress on a daily basis.

Breathing exercise: Lie on your back in a comfortable position. Simply breathe in and out. As you breathe, place a hand on your stomach. You should feel your stomach rise and fall with each breath. Once your breathing is even and slow, start



counting with each breath. Breathe in for a count of three to five, filling your lungs completely, and breathe out for a count of five to eight, pushing all the air out of your lungs. If these counts are not comfortable for you, follow your own breathing pattern. You may even choose to quietly say a one-syllable word, like “peace,” as you breathe. This is called mantra breathing. Repeat four to five times and you should feel more relaxed.

Progressive muscle relaxation: Lie on your back in a comfortable position. Wear loose, comfortable clothing. As you breathe, place a hand on your stomach. You should feel your stomach rise and fall with each breath. As your breathing becomes slow and steady, start to tighten your calf muscles by pointing your toes. Keep your muscles tight for a count of five and then relax for a count of five. Move up your legs to your thighs and tighten them for five counts and then relax for five. Next, go to your bottom and squeeze tight for five and relax for five. Make sure to continue to breathe consistently. Inhale deeply and exhale completely throughout this exercise. Continue this exercise by moving to your stomach, back, shoulders and face. Finally, tighten everything together at once for five counts and relax. Continue your breathing for a while until you feel you can open your eyes and sit up slowly.

Meditation: Meditation involves total concentration on one thing. It can be a sound (waves crashing on the shore), a word (“peace”), an image (a beautiful sunset) or your breathing. This technique helps to calm your thoughts and helps you to live in the moment, focusing on only the present. Meditation reduces stress by lowering your blood pressure, relieving headaches, relieving anxiety and depression, giving you more energy and boosting your self confidence. Start by meditating for five to 15 minutes. Make sure you are in a comfortable position and wearing comfortable, loose-fitting clothes. Don’t get discouraged if your mind wanders at first. It will take practice to learn to stay focused.

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Medical Treatment

Medications

Medications are commonly used to treat back pain. However, they are not effective in treating the underlying causes of back pain. They should be used only on a short-term basis to help you through the initial recovery process. Always consult your doctor before taking any medications.

Over-the-counter (OTC) medications

OTC medications give quick relief for minor back pain. These medications can be purchased without a prescription.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are used to relieve mild to moderate pain and reduce inflammation. Examples include ibuprofen (Advil and Motrin), naproxen (Aleve) and aspirin. If taken incorrectly, NSAIDs can cause serious side effects.

If OTC medications are not effective in treating your back pain and symptoms, talk to your health care provider about other treatment options. Always ask your health care provider before taking any medication. Carefully read and follow the instructions on the bottle. Do not combine medications unless instructed by your health care provider to do so. Do not use alcohol while taking any OTC medications.

Prescription medications

If OTC medications are not enough to relieve your pain, your health care provider may recommend prescription medication. Prescription medications include stronger pain relievers and muscle relaxants. They can be in the form of oral medications or injections.

Important questions to ask your health care provider

1. What is the name of my back pain medication? Is that the generic name or brand name?
2. How often should I take my medication?
3. Should I take my medication in the morning, afternoon or at night?
4. Should I take my medication with or without food?
5. Could my medication have any side effects?
6. Do you want an up-to-date list of all the medications I am taking?
7. How does the medicine I am taking work to control my back pain?

Other treatments

Massage

Massage helps reduce stress and relieves muscle tension. Massage is effective in reducing tightness of tender muscles — such as those in the back of the head, neck and shoulders. It also increases blood flow in those areas.

Physical therapy

Certain physical therapy techniques can help reduce back pain. In general, the goals of physical therapy are to decrease pain, increase function and provide education on a maintenance program to prevent further recurrences. These include manual therapy, EMG biofeedback, ultrasound, a personalized exercise program, motor control exercises (MCE), massage and relaxation techniques.

Chiropractic care

Chiropractic focuses on disorders of the musculoskeletal system and the nervous system. A misalignment of the bones of the back or neck may irritate the nerves that travel the length of the spine. Realigning the vertebrae — a chiropractor's specialty — relieves the pressure against inflamed nerves and can in turn relax muscles and reduce pain.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture involves penetrating the skin with thin metallic needles placed at specific points. It is a traditional Chinese treatment. It began more than 2,000 years ago. This treatment may help to reduce back pain and relieve muscle tension. Refer to your summary of benefits to find out which services are covered under your plan.

Surgical procedures

Most people with back pain do not need to have surgery. Surgery is usually recommended only for people with fractures or severe disability. These include a herniated disk, narrowing of the spine, sciatica, degenerative or failing discs, arthritis of the spine or instability of the spine. Surgery can also be very expensive. Before you decide to have back surgery, talk to your health care provider about all the risks and benefits. If a health care provider recommends surgery, you may want to consider getting a second opinion. Refer to your summary of benefits to find out which services are covered under your plan.



Partnering with your health care team

Open, honest communication with your health care provider is one key to good medical care. The information you share helps him or her make your diagnosis and plan your treatment. Tell your health care provider about all of your symptoms, your medical history and your treatment preferences. Your health care provider will use this information to design a treatment plan just for you. He or she may recommend tests like X-rays, MRIs (magnetic resonance imaging) or CT (computed tomography) scans. Depending on your symptoms and treatment of choice, your health care provider may refer you to a specialist such as a physical therapist, chiropractor, orthopedic surgeon, neurologist, occupational therapist, psychologist or acupuncturist. Before your office visit, be prepared. Write down a list of questions, so that you won't forget. At your office visits, talk openly with your health care team about:

- Your back pain treatment plan, including self-care, lifestyle changes and medical treatment
- Problems with managing your back pain
- Any medications you are taking, including prescriptions, OTC medicines, vitamins and supplements
- Other health conditions you have
- Any other concerns you may have about your health

Listen closely to your health care provider. Ask questions about anything you don't understand. Jot down notes on what you discussed and when your next visit will be. And follow your health care provider's advice.



When to call your health care provider

Contact your health care provider right away if you experience any of the following:

- Severe pain or pain that gets worse
- Pain that travels down your leg
- High fever or nausea
- Abdominal pain
- Numbness, weakness or tingling in your lower body or feet
- Rapid or unexplained weight loss
- Problems controlling urination or bowel movement

Maintaining A Healthy Back

Simple tips

During and after your recovery, make sure to avoid situations that could cause re-injury. You can prevent falls by making simple changes.

- Wear sensible shoes — Wearing shoes like high heels, certain types of slippers and thick-soled shoes can make slipping and falling easier.
- Remove home hazards — Look around your home to make sure electrical cords aren't in walkways and that rugs are secure.
- Light up your living space — Place night lights in hallways or bedrooms and make clear paths to light switches and lamps.

Get regular preventive exams

You should schedule a preventive exam every year with your primary care doctor. You should also receive other preventive exams recommended for those your age (ask your health care provider). Make sure to contact your health care provider if you experience any back pain, especially if it lasts for more than four weeks. Doctors can now detect and treat early stages of back pain, so it's important that you get checkups on a regular basis.

Resources

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS)

www.niams.nih.gov/Health_Info/Back_Pain/default.asp#7

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/backpain/detail_backpain.htm

U.S. National Library of Medicine

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/backpain.html

Mayo Clinic

Back pain

www.mayoclinic.com/health/back-pain/DS00171


Cleveland Clinic

my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases_conditions/hic_your_back_and_neck/hic_the_basics_of_back_pain

These are independent organizations that offer health care information you may find helpful.

These links lead to third party websites. Those companies are solely responsible for the contents and privacy policies on their sites.

The information contained in this brochure is for educational purposes only. It does not represent a standard of care. Your physician must determine the appropriateness of the information in light of all your circumstances. It is important to discuss options with your physician when deciding on the best treatment for you.



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