

Low back pain – chronic

What is Chronic Low Back Pain?

Back pain is one of the most common health complaints. Almost everyone will have back pain at some time in their life. Most of the time, the exact cause of the pain cannot be found.

Causes

One single event may not cause your pain. You may have been doing many things improperly -- such as standing or lifting -- for a long time. Then suddenly, one simple movement (such as reaching for something or bending from your waist) leads to pain.

Many people with chronic back pain have arthritis and extra wear and tear on the spine. This may be due to:

- Heavy use from work or sports
- Past injuries and fractures
- Past surgery

You may have had a herniated disk, where part of the spinal disk pushed onto nearby nerves. Normally, the disks provide space and cushion in your spine. If these disks dry out and become thinner and more brittle, you can lose movement in the spine over time.

If the spaces between the spinal nerves and spinal cord become narrowed, this can lead to spinal stenosis. These problems are called degenerative joint or spine disease.

Other possible causes of chronic low back pain:

- Curvatures of the spine (such as scoliosis or kyphosis), which may be passed down in families
- Medical problems, such as fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, and psoriatic arthritis
- Piriformis syndrome (a pain disorder involving a narrow muscle in the buttocks)

You are at greater risk for low back pain if you:

- Are over age 30
- Are overweight
- Are pregnant
- Do not exercise
- Feel stressed or depressed

- Have a job in which you have to do a lot of heavy lifting, bending and twisting, or that involves whole body vibration (such as truck driving or using a sandblaster)
- Smoke

Symptoms

You may feel a variety of symptoms if you have back pain, including:

- Dull aching
- Sharp pain
- Tingling or burning sensation
- Weakness in your legs or feet

Low back pain can differ from person to person. The pain may be mild, or it can be so severe that you are unable to move.

Depending on the cause of your back pain, you may also have pain in your leg, hip, or on the bottom of your foot.

Exams and Tests

During the physical exam, the health care provider will try to pinpoint the location of the pain and figure out how it affects your movement.

What other tests you have depend on your medical history and symptoms (including how the symptoms developed). Tests might include:

- Blood tests, especially a complete blood count and erythrocyte sedimentation rate
- CT scan of the lower spine
- MRI scan of the lower spine
- Myelogram (an x-ray or CT scan of the spine after dye has been injected into the spinal column)
- X-ray

Treatment

If you have any concerning symptoms, call your doctor right away.

Your back pain may not go away completely, or it may get more painful at times. Learning to take care of your back at home and how to prevent repeat episodes of back pain can help you continue with your normal activities.

Your doctor and other health professionals can help you manage your pain and keep you as active as possible.

- Your doctor may refer you for physical therapy. The physical therapist may try to reduce your pain, using stretches and traction. The therapist will show you how to do exercises that make your back muscles stronger, so you can prevent future back pain.
- Cold packs and heat therapy may help your back pain.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy may be helpful. This technique helps you better understand your pain and teaches you how to manage your back pain.

A number of different medications can help with your back pain:

- Drugs (NSAIDs) such as aspirin, naproxen sodium (Aleve), and ibuprofen (Advil)
- Low doses of prescription medicines used to treat seizures or depression (antidepressants)
- Pain medicines called narcotics or opioids when the pain is very severe

When a severe episode of pain does not improve with medicine, physical therapy, and other treatments, you may need an epidural injection.

Spinal surgery should be considered only if you have nerve damage, or the condition causing the back pain does not heal after a long period of time.

Some people with low back pain may also need:

- Job changes
- Job counseling
- Job retraining
- Occupational therapy

Outlook (Prognosis)

Most back problems will get better on their own. The key is to know when you need to seek medical help and when self-care measures will allow you to get better.

Possible Complications

Future spine problems are possible for patients who have spine surgery. You may have a greater chance of future problems if you have more than one type of back surgery.

Prevention

A common myth about back pain is that you need to rest and avoid activity for a long time. In fact, doctors do not recommend bed rest. If you have no sign of a serious cause for your back pain (such as loss of bowel or bladder control, weakness, weight loss, or fever), stay as active as possible.

Here are tips for how to handle back pain and activity:

- Stop normal physical activity for only the first few days. This helps calm your symptoms and reduce swelling (inflammation) in the area of the pain.
- Apply heat or ice to the painful area. Use ice for the first 48 to 72 hours, then use heat.
- Take over-the-counter pain relievers such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB) or acetaminophen (Tylenol).
- Sleep in a curled-up, fetal position with a pillow between your legs. If you usually sleep on your back, place a pillow or rolled towel under your knees to relieve pressure.
- Do not do activities that involve heavy lifting or twisting of your back for the first 6 weeks after the pain begins.
- Do not exercise in the days right after the pain begins. After 2 to 3 weeks, slowly begin to exercise again. A physical therapist can teach you which exercises are right for you.

EXERCISE TO PREVENT FUTURE BACK PAIN

Through exercise you can:

- Improve your posture
- Strengthen your back and improve flexibility
- Lose weight
- Avoid falls

A complete exercise program should include aerobic activity (such as walking, swimming, or riding a stationary bicycle), as well as stretching and strength training. Follow the instructions of your doctor or physical therapist.

Begin with light cardiovascular training. Walking, riding a stationary bicycle, and swimming are great examples. These types of aerobic activities can help improve blood flow to your back and promote healing. They also strengthen muscles in your stomach and back.

Stretching and strengthening exercises are important in the long run. Keep in mind that starting these exercises too soon after an injury can make your pain worse. Strengthening your abdominal muscles can ease the stress on your back. A physical therapist can help you determine when to begin stretching and strengthening exercises and how to do them.

Avoid these exercises during recovery, unless your doctor or physical therapist say it is okay:

- Jogging
- Contact sports
- Racquet sports
- Golf

- Dancing
- Weight lifting
- Leg lifts when lying on your stomach
- Sit-ups

TAKING MEASURES TO PREVENT FUTURE BACK PAIN

To prevent back pain, learn to lift and bend properly. Follow these tips:

- If an object is too heavy or awkward, get help.
- Spread your feet apart to give you a wide base of support.
- Stand as close as possible to the object you are lifting.
- Bend at your knees, not at your waist.
- Tighten your stomach muscles as you lift or lower the object.
- Hold the object as close to your body as you can.
- Lift using your leg muscles.
- As you stand up while holding the object, do not bend forward.
- Do not twist while you are bending to reach for the object, lifting it up, or carrying it.

Other measures to prevent back pain include:

- Avoid standing for long periods. If you must stand for your work, place a stool by your feet. Alternate resting each foot on the stool.
- Do not wear high heels. Wear shoes that have cushioned soles when walking.
- When sitting, especially if using a computer, make sure that your chair has a straight back with an adjustable seat and back, armrests, and a swivel seat.
- Use a stool under your feet while sitting so that your knees are higher than your hips.
- Place a small pillow or rolled towel behind your lower back while sitting or driving for long periods.
- If you drive long distance, stop and walk around every hour. Do not lift heavy objects just after a long ride.
- Quit smoking.
- Lose weight.
- Do exercises to strengthen your abdominal muscles. This will strengthen your core to decrease the risk of further injuries.

- Learn to relax. Try methods such as yoga, tai chi, or massage.