

Managing Back Pain



Whether it's a breathtaking stab of pain, a nagging pull or a burning throb in the small of your spine, back pain is one of the most common health problems among American adults.

In addition to being painful, back pain is expensive. A common cause of lost workdays, back pain costs more than \$80 billion a year in medical, legal and lost production costs.

Although most back problems are minor, they can be a painful, chronic condition for some.

Back pain is often caused by repeated stress on the back, rather than the result of a single incident. Common causes of this stress are excessive forward bending or heavy lifting, sitting or standing too long at work, impact or twisting sports, and poor posture.

COMMON CAUSES

Strains and sprains. Muscle, joint and ligament strains occur when you bend too far or too often, lift heavy loads or twist suddenly. Usually, these things happen every day, but don't cause pain or inflammation. Problems occur when these mini-traumas heal. Scar

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tissue, which is weaker and less flexible than muscles and ligaments, forms and makes the back less flexible and strong.

Herniated disks. Also called a ruptured or prolapsed disk, this painful disorder occurs when a portion of the disk (nucleus pulposus) protrudes into the spinal canal after a tear in the disk. Tears are caused by degeneration, wear and tear or trauma.

Traumatic injuries. Severe force in a car accident or fall can dislocate or fracture vertebrae or tear ligaments, causing pain and swelling.

PREVENTING PAIN

Except for a few instances, back pain is largely preventable. While sitting, make sure your lower back has enough support. Ask for an ergonomically designed chair at work, or if that's not possible, place a rolled towel at the small of your back. Also, take time to walk around and stretch at least once an hour throughout your workday.

If you spend most of your time on your feet, periodically prop one foot up, and bend over to touch your toes—don't forget to bend at your knees—throughout the day.

At home, sleep on your back with a small pillow under your knees, or on your side with a pillow between your knees. Sleeping on your stomach puts too much stress on the back.

If you have to lift an object, make sure you can handle the load. A quick test of lifting up a corner should tell you whether you can. Never bend at the waist to pick up something. Always bend at the knees. Keep the object close to your body and don't twist. Avoid lifting over your head and push, instead of pull, a heavy object.

Exercise also can keep your back healthy, but be careful. While some activities benefit your cardiovascular system, they can harm your back. These activities include twisting, bending and impact. Before beginning any exercise program, consult your health care provider.

Reducing your stress level, losing weight and quitting smoking can also help reduce back pain. Stress creates muscle tension, excessive weight pulls the spine, and smoking makes it difficult for the blood to deliver oxygen to working tissues. The result is a weak back.

If you experience back pain, seek medical attention. Often, pain is treated with rest, heat and cold applications, medication and rehabilitation. Only the most severe cases require surgery.

Information adapted from the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons, Onhealth.com and www.bethisrealny.org.

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