

Low Back Pain



Allina Health

Low Back Pain Without a Serious Diagnosis

The back is strong and flexible. It is difficult to damage or dislocate it. **Most low back pain is not caused by a serious problem (condition).**

If you have had a detailed history and physical exam with your health care provider and he or she did not find a serious problem, what's next?

Imaging such as an X-ray or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is not often needed to know how to treat low back pain without a serious diagnosis. These tests can lead to unneeded treatment and medical expenses. It is best to focus on relieving pain through self-care strategies.

Tests

Oftentimes, tests are not needed and do not help with treatment. Your health care provider will give you an exam to check for serious problems.

Depending on your exam and health history, your health care provider will talk with you about what tests he or she thinks you should have. These tests include MRIs, X-rays and electromyography (EMG) studies.

Recovery

What you do during your first days of low back pain will impact your recovery.

- **Do not be on bed rest for more than 1 to 2 days.**
More time spent without movement can delay recovery.
- **Keep moving!** Your back will recover quicker by building strength and increasing your ability to move well (mobility).
- Light physical activities such as walking, yoga and pool exercises can be helpful.
- Try to take breaks to stand up and move for 2 to 3 minutes every 30 minutes if you sit at your job.

Treatment and Prevention

☐ Light physical activities

Light physical activities can help you:

- stay active
- strengthen your muscles
- improve your flexibility
- maintain a healthy weight
- lower your risk of getting low back pain again
- decrease anxiety, stress or both.

Tip

Try doing light physical activities such as walking, yoga and pool exercises.

It is important to increase your physical activity slowly. Your muscles may be sore after physical activity. This is normal and should go away in about 1 day. **If you have new pain or an increase in your pain, stop doing the physical activity right away and talk with your health care provider.**

Here are some tips to help you get started.

- Focus on what you can do instead of what you cannot do.
- Rotate between different types of physical activities (walking on Monday, yoga on Tuesday) to help prevent discomfort and muscle soreness.

Talk with your health care provider if you have questions or need help getting started.

❑ Cold pack

Use a cold pack for the first 2 to 4 days after your low back pain begins or gets worse. This can reduce swelling and pain.

❑ Warm pack

Use a warm pack 3 to 4 days after your low back pain begins or gets worse. This can reduce pain by causing your blood vessels to open. It can also increase oxygen flow to help ease stiff joints and sore muscles.

❑ Physical therapy

Physical therapy focuses on reducing your pain and helping you to be active. Your physical therapist will help you understand your pain and teach you exercises to help you move better. When you talk with him or her, take notes and ask questions. Be sure to mention:

- when and how your pain started
- what makes your pain better or worse
- what methods of pain control have worked or have not worked well in the past
- if you feel new pain
- if the pain makes you feel anxious or afraid.

Together, you and your physical therapist will make a treatment plan that meets your needs.

Important

It is recommended to use a cold or warm pack no more than one time every 60 minutes for 15 to 20 minutes at a time. To increase comfort, place a clean, dry towel between your skin and the cold or warm pack.

❑ **Chiropractic health care**

Doctors of chiropractic check the way your bones, muscles and nerves are working together. When they find areas in your back (spine) or other joints in the body that are not working, they use an adjustment to help correct this.

This comfortable treatment helps you return to activity by:

- reducing your pain
- helping you get your ability to move back
- releasing muscle tension in your spine and other parts of your body.

Your chiropractor may:

- adjust your spine or other parts of your body
- use massage, exercise, nutrition counseling, posture education, stress management, therapeutic ultrasound and electric stimulation to help you heal.

Talk with your health care provider if you have questions about chiropractic health care.

❑ **Over-the-counter pain medicines**

Over-the-counter pain medicines help with healing by reducing swelling and pain. This includes:

- acetaminophen (Tylenol®)
- ibuprofen (Advil® or Motrin®)
- aspirin
- naproxen (Aleve®).

Important

Do not take more than one type of anti-inflammatory medicine at one time unless your health care provider gives you other instructions.

Anti-inflammatory medicines may cause stomach upset for some people. Take the medicine as directed. Taking this medicine with food or milk may be helpful to control stomach upset. Call your health care provider if you have any questions.

Other Options to Consider

Talk with your health care provider about other options that may help improve your low back pain. This may include:

- electrical stimulation (e-stim)
- acupuncture
- deep breathing
- therapeutic massage.

Your health care provider can provide more information about each of these options and answer any questions you have.

Healthy Lifestyle Changes

Good sleep

Getting enough sleep is important. It affects your physical and mental health. Sleep is especially important while your body is healing.

Your sleeping position can also help improve your back pain. Do not sleep on your stomach if it increases your pain.

If you sleep on your side, you can put:

- one or two pillows between your knees to help support your legs and decrease strain on your low back
- one pillow behind your back to help support your back
- one pillow under your head to help support the natural curves of your spine.

If you sleep on your back, you can put:

- one pillow under your head to help support the natural curves of your spine.
- a rolled-up towel behind your back or one to two pillows under your knees to help decrease strain on your low back.

Talk with your health care provider if you have questions about how to be more comfortable during sleep.

☐ Stop tobacco use

Smoking can cause low back problems. It also delays your body's healing process. Talk with your health care provider if you need help quitting smoking.

☐ Good posture

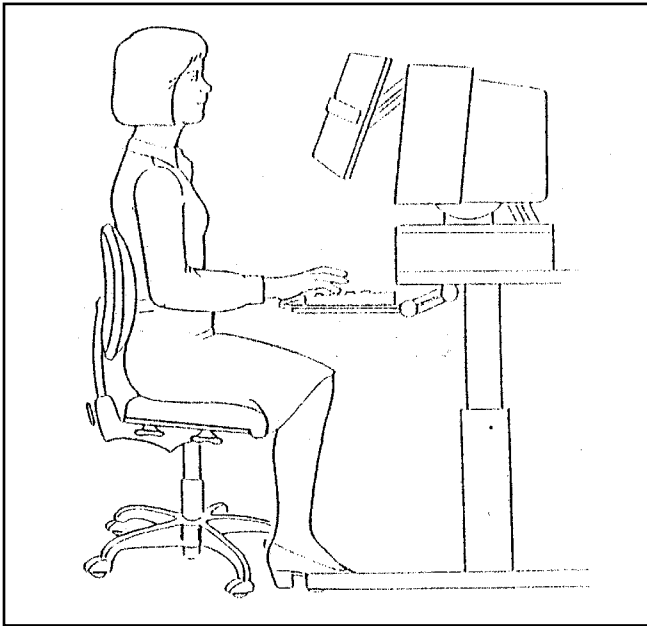
Poor posture puts stress on your spinal column. Use good posture to prevent back strain.

Use the following tips to help you maintain good posture while you stand.

- Keep your head high, chin tucked in and shoulders back.
- Let your arms hang free.
- Keep your stomach in.
- Keep your knees straight with your feet slightly apart.
- Keep a small arch in your lower back.
- Shift your weight from one foot to the other when standing for a long time. You can also put one foot on a stool and switch positions with your other foot once in a while. This will lower the stress on your spine.

Use the following tips to help you maintain good posture while you sit.

- Sit upright with your head facing forward.
- Keep your shoulders back and relaxed. You may want to use a lumbar roll to support your lower back.
- Keep your knees slightly lower than your hips. Do not cross your legs.
- Keep your feet flat on the floor.



Good posture while you sit

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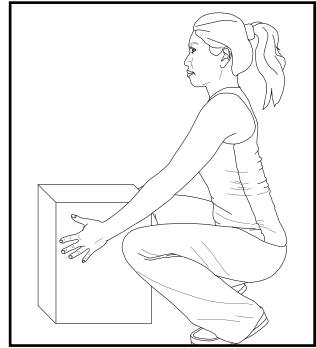
□ Move, bend and lift correctly

How you move, bend and lift can put stress on your spine. It is important to keep your body in good alignment and use proper movements to help prevent spinal pain and injury.

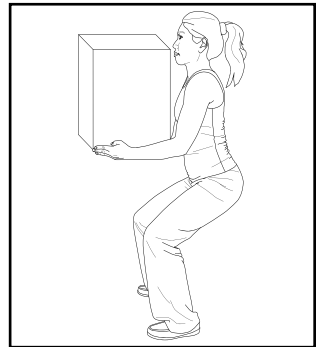
Use proper movements when you lift or push. Figure out if an object is too bulky or heavy before moving it. Ask for help with moving heavy objects or use a pushcart or dolly when possible.

The following guidelines can help you lift correctly.

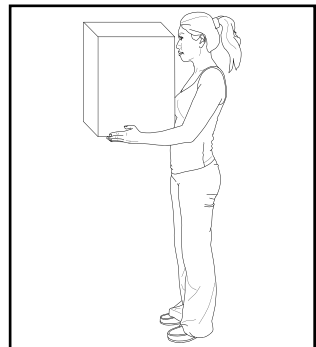
- Bend your legs and knees, not your back. Use your legs to supply most of the force you need to lift.
- Keep your elbows close to your body at elbow height.
- Do not hold your breath.
- Get close to the object and straddle it between your knees if possible.
- Keep your back straight. Bend your knees and hips at the same time. Put one knee on the floor if you need more stability.
- Lift by straightening your knees and hips. Keep your abdominal muscles and buttocks tight.
- Do not twist or turn.



Step 1



Step 2



Step 3

The following guidelines can help you push correctly.

- Bend at your knees and hips. Use your leg muscles, not your back muscles, to push.
- Put one leg behind the other for better leverage.
- Lean your body toward the object being pushed.
- Apply force squarely to the direction of the object being pushed.
- Do not twist or turn.

□ Healthy eating

Talk with your health care provider for more information about healthy eating.

When to Call Your Health Care Provider

Call your health care provider right away if you have any of the following:

- an injury that causes new back pain (fall, car accident)
- fever or unexplained weight loss
- sudden changes in bowel or bladder control
- severe numbness, tingling, pain or weakness in an arm or leg that gets worse or spreads
- loss of feeling in your anal or genital area.

When to See Your Health Care Provider

You should schedule an appointment with your health care provider if you have:

- back pain that gets worse or does not improve
- severe pain at night or pain that gets worse when you lie down
- new but mild numbness, tingling, pain or weakness in an arm or leg
- questions about how to manage your pain.

Your health care provider may want you to schedule an appointment with a spine specialist.



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