

Treatments for Spinal Pain

Spinal Pain

Most spinal pain comes from back and neck injury. Your health care provider will follow a treatment program to help relieve your spinal pain.

There are three phases to treatment:

- **Self-care (phase I):** Your health care provider will recommend self-care you can do at home. Your goal is to return to normal activity as soon as possible.
- **Treatments (phase II):** Your health care provider may want you to have medicine, physical therapy, chiropractic care or massage therapy. Your goals are to return to normal activity and to provide pain relief to let you be active.
- **Rehabilitation (phase III):** Your health care provider may prescribe rehabilitation. Your goal is to regain strength, movement and endurance, and return to normal activity.

Most back and neck injuries fully heal in a few weeks — just like a sprained ankle. With a little time, you should be able to return to all your normal activities.

Causes of Pain

In most cases, your health care provider will not be able to find the exact source of your pain. This is true even if he or she knows about a specific event that caused it, such as a fall or a car accident. There are too many pain-sensitive parts in your spine to pinpoint a specific one.

Spinal pain is often not the result of a specific event. It is the end result of years of smaller injuries to your spine. These may include minor sprains and strains, poor posture, stress or working conditions.

Spinal pain can also be caused by a lack of physical activity. Studies indicate that people who have the strongest and most flexible spines suffer fewer injuries.

Phase I

Your health care provider will give you an exam. Self-care activities he or she may recommend include:

- taking over-the-counter pain relief medicines. These include ibuprofen (Advil® or Motrin®), aspirin or naproxen (Aleve®). If you can't take these, take acetaminophen (Tylenol®).
- applying cold packs for the first 72 hours after injury. This will help reduce pain and swelling.
- applying heat or cold (whichever reduces your pain the best) **after** the first 72 hours.
 - Use of heat or cold for up to 30 minutes at a time. Wait 20 to 30 minutes before you apply it again.
 - Do not sleep with a heating pad. It can burn your skin.

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- being as active as possible without increasing your pain.
 - Studies indicate that even if your pain is severe, staying in bed for more than 2 days can do more harm than good.
 - Your recovery may be faster and more complete if you walk, do as many normal activities as possible and do the gentle exercises your health care provider prescribes.

Your health care provider's exam will find any "red flags" that may indicate serious conditions. These may include disc herniations, arthritis or tumors. You may need to have special imaging tests such as X-rays, CT or MRI scans.

If your health care provider does not find a problem, then there is usually no reason to order imaging tests. The tests do not help with treatment.

Call your health care provider or urgent care right away if you have:

- loss of bowel or bladder control
- severe numbness, tingling, pain or weakness in an arm or leg that gets worse or spreads
- severe pain at night or pain that gets worse when you lie down
- fever, chills or unexplained weight loss
- loss of feeling in your anal or genital area.

If you don't feel better after 1 to 2 weeks of self-care, call your health care provider to see if you need to go to Phase II.

Phase II

Your health care provider may prescribe stronger medicines, physical therapy, chiropractic care or massage therapy.

During visits you:

- will learn about proper posture, lifting and body mechanics
- will learn how to regain abilities lost to spinal pain
- will receive an exercise program created for you. You may learn how to decrease stress, improve posture or reduce workloads.
- may receive treatments such as ultrasound, spinal manipulation (chiropractic care) or massage with manual therapy.

Phase II treatments relieve spinal pain for most people. If your pain is not relieved, your health care provider may refer you to Phase III.

Phase III

If your pain is not relieved after 6 weeks of treatments, it is known as chronic pain (long-term). Your health care provider may refer you to a rehabilitation program to strengthen your spine.

Your health care provider will give you information about rehab.

How to Keep Spinal Pain From Returning

There are many steps you can take on your own:

- Exercise regularly.
- Use good posture.
- Take special care when lifting. Use good form.
- Avoid being in any one position for a long time.
- Get enough rest.
- Manage your stress.