

Low Back Pain, Acute

What is it?

Low back pain usually comes from injury to muscles or ligaments in the lower spine. Your body tries to protect the injured area by tightening the lower back muscles. The pain you feel is often just from these tight muscles. Muscles that tighten too hard are in spasm. A spasm is the same thing as a cramp. Sometimes low back pain may be caused by injury to a disc between the bones in your back. Injury may put pressure on nerves as they come from the back on their way to the legs. This is often called a herniated disc or ruptured disc. In most cases these problems are treated the same as a muscle or ligament injury.

What is the cause?

Most adults have low back pain at some time in their lives. It may happen after lifting something heavy. You may get back pain from just sitting for a long time. Often the cause is uncertain. There are a number of things that increase your risk of having low back pain. These include:

- Smoking
- Being too heavy
- Getting older
- Lack of exercise
- Driving a car for long periods
- Hard physical labor with lifting
- Feeling stressed
- Being unhappy at your job

What are the symptoms?

Your pain may be on one or both sides of the back. It is usually a dull ache. Sometimes when you move, you will feel sharp pain as the muscles spasm. You may not be able to move during a spasm. You may feel pain down the buttocks or into your leg if a nerve coming from the spine is irritated. Prolonged sitting or standing will often make your pain worse. So will bending over, twisting, or lifting heavy things. The pain may be worse when you cough or sneeze. You will probably feel more stiff and sore in the morning after you get up. You may be more stiff and sore at the end of the day when you are tired.

How is it treated?

The best thing is to be as active as you can. The pain will go away faster if you keep moving. Walking is one of the best exercises for many people with back problems. Medicine such as aspirin, ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil, or Nuprin), or naproxen (Aleve) will help reduce your pain. You can take acetaminophen (Tylenol) if you can't take aspirin or similar medicines. We may prescribe a medicine to help relieve spasm in your muscles. Medicine will probably not get rid of all the pain, however.

Avoid anything that causes the pain to get worse. If the pain is severe, it may be necessary for you to rest for 1 or 2 days after your injury. Do not stay in bed longer than this. Staying in bed too long can make back pain worse.

During the first few days, you may find that ice massage or heat helps reduce the pain. When you are ready, we may give you some gentle exercises to strengthen the muscles of your stomach. We may show you stretches to help keep your back flexible. We may have you see a physical therapist for special treatments and exercises. We may discuss how to avoid future injury to your back.

What can I expect?

Most people get better within 2 to 4 weeks no matter what treatment they use. Most people are able to resume normal activities quickly. However, you will need to avoid heavy lifting until your back has healed. In some cases, this can mean restrictions on what you do at work.

In some cases lower back pain takes longer to get better. We may need to do X-rays or other tests if your pain does not improve. Occasionally back surgery may be the best way to treat your problem. We will not consider this, however, until you have given your back adequate time to heal on its own.

A mattress of medium firmness has been shown to be better for back pain than a hard mattress.

Many people who experience low back pain will have it again later in life. Treatment is usually the same each time.

What to watch for.

Let us know immediately if you experience numbness in your groin or down both legs. Seek immediate medical care if you are having bowel or bladder control problems. Call us if you have pain at night that is not helped by rest or medicine. Call us if you run a fever for more than 2 days. Let us know if your pain is not better within a week. Let us know if you have pain in your abdomen.

Instructions:

After 3 days apply heat 4 times a day for 20 minutes.

You can apply dry heat with a heating pad. To avoid burns, do not use heating pads on the high setting. Do not take a heating pad to bed. You can be seriously burned if you fall asleep.

You can apply moist heat by soaking a towel in warm (not hot) water. Place it on the injured area. Re-warm the towel frequently.

Never leave children alone with a heat source. They can be seriously burned.

Apply an ice pack 4 times a day for 20 minutes the first 2 days.

Put ice cubes or chips in a plastic bag. Wrap a towel around the ice pack, or drape a towel over the injured area, to avoid applying ice directly to your skin.

Avoid being constipated and avoid straining while having a bowel movement.

Straining while have a bowel movement may make your condition worse. Preventing constipation will make straining less of a problem. Eat a diet high in fiber, drink plenty of fluids, exercise and be as active as possible. If constipation is a problem for you, let us know.

Avoid sitting for more than a few minutes at a time for the next 2 weeks.

Sitting for a long time puts more strain on your lower back than standing or lying down.

Begin a walking program. Start with walks lasting 10 minutes and slowly work up to 30-40 minutes as pain allows.

If your pain is too bad at first, trying walking in a swimming pool. This will put less weight on your back. Avoid bending over or twisting your back while exercising.

Do not resume your normal level of activity until you have been rechecked.

Beginning activities slowly will allow your body to adapt to being active again. You may find you are more tired or have discomfort. Allow yourself time to rest in between activities. Try not to rush. Resuming your activities too quickly may make your condition worse.

Rest the injured area as much as possible.

Avoid heavy lifting and anything that puts a strain on the injured area. Use slow, normal movements to prevent further injury.

Some eating tips that can help you lose weight.

- Eat only at the table. Avoid eating while watching TV or doing other activities.
- Eat only when you are hungry – not out of boredom or when you feel bad.
- Do not skip meals. This will prevent you from overeating at the next meal. Keep plenty of low-calorie snacks available. Fruits and vegetables are good choices.
- Bring your lunch to school or work.
- Drink ice water with meals. This helps decrease the appetite.
- Eat low-fat, low-salt, low-sugar foods.
- Avoid fatty foods like fried foods, prepared meats, and fast foods.
- Eat foods that are high in bulk, such as vegetables, whole grain breads, and cereals.
- Eat foods with complex sugars such as rice, beans, pasta.
- Eat slowly. Put your spoon down between bites. You will feel full sooner.
- Allow yourself an occasional treat.

Spinal manipulation may be helpful for your problem.

This is also called spinal adjustment. It is done by a doctor of osteopathy (DO) or doctor of chiropractic (DC). During an adjustment, the doctor will put pressure on your back while moving you into different positions.

To prevent back injury, strengthen your abdomen, buttock, and hamstring muscles with “bridge exercises.” Do these 10 times in a row, 3 times a day, holding it for 6 seconds each time.

1. Lie on your back on the floor with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Put a pillow under your neck to keep it from arching. Keep your arms by your side, palms down.
2. Tighten your stomach and buttock muscles.
3. Slowly lift your buttocks off the floor. Try to raise them high enough that your back is straight. Do not let your back arch. Hold this position.
4. Slowly lower your buttocks down to the floor. Relax and repeat.

Once your muscles are strong enough that you can do the above exercise easily, you can try this advanced version:

1. Do steps 1 through 3 above. Now lift one foot up and hold that leg out straight.
2. Slowly return that foot to the floor. Lower your buttocks down the floor. Relax and repeat, lifting the other leg.

We recommend that you avoid straining your back while lifting.

- Do not lean over at the waist to pick something up. Squat down by bending your knees.
- Keep your feet apart. Step back a few inches with one foot. This makes it easier to squat without falling.
- Pull the thing you are lifting as close in to your chest or stomach as you can.
- Keep your lower back straight and your head up as you stand up.
- Lift with your legs, not your back. You should feel your leg muscles working, not your back muscles.
- If you must turn, turn with your feet. That is, step around so that you are facing in the right direction. Do not twist at the waist or knees.
- To lower something, reverse this process. Keep the weight close to you. Keep your back straight and your head up. Lower yourself down as far as you can be bending at the knees. Keep your feet apart.

We recommend that you do knee-to-chest exercises to stretch your back. Do this exercise 10 times in a row, 3 times a day, and hold the stretch for 20 seconds each time.

We recommend that you strengthen your abdominal muscles. Do this exercise 30 times in a row, twice a day.

We recommend that you strengthen your back muscles by doing prone extension exercises. Do this exercise 10 times in a row, 3 times a day, holding it for 6 seconds each time.

We recommend that you stretch your back backwards. Do this exercise 5 times a day for 10 seconds each time.

We recommend that you stretch your back by doing the cat stretch. Do this exercise 10 times a day, holding the stretch for 20 seconds each time.

We recommend that you stretch your middle back. Do this exercise 5 times a day, holding the stretch for 10 seconds each time.

We suggest that you use a lumbar support cushion when sitting or driving.

We want you to strengthen your abdominal oblique muscles. Do these exercises 10 times on each side per set, 3 times a day.

Wear a back brace for 10 hours a day.

Stay in bed for 2 days. Get up only when necessary.

Instructions:

There are several things you can do to help your back heal and stay healthy.

- Use good posture to help keep your back and body in alignment. Sit with both feet on the floor. When standing, stand tall and do not slouch or lean on one hip or the other. Keep your head high and your abdominal muscles tight.
- Sleep on a firm mattress. A pillow under your knees may help relieve pain.
- Avoid heavy lifting. If you have to lift, use good body mechanics. Lift with your legs by bending your knees and holding the weight close to your body.
- Avoid activities that aggravate your pain. Long car rides and prolonged sitting may increase your pain. Stand or take walks frequently.
- A walking program will be beneficial. Gradually increase your walking as you can depending on your back pain.
- Keep your abdominal muscles in good shape to help support your back muscles.
- Maintain your proper weight.
- Choose proper footwear. Wear flat shoes or shoes with only a one-inch heel.
- You may want to enroll in a back exercise program. We can suggest one for you.

We have prescribed standing hamstring stretches. Hold each stretch for 30 seconds. Repeat each stretch 2 times and do them twice daily.

Put one foot up on a stool, chair, or box. Keep this leg straight. Gently lean forward, reaching your arms down your outstretched leg, until you feel a stretch on the back of the leg. Hold the stretch and repeat it as directed. Then switch legs and do the same on the other leg. Avoid bouncing and straining. Be patient. Steady improvement will be seen if you slowly stretch a bit farther each day.

We recommend a goal of 140 pounds for your weight. This equals a body mass index (BMI) of 25. Your present BMI is 27.

The BMI is a way to measure how much of your weight is fat. Having a BMI of 27 or more means you have an increased risk of heart attack, stroke, diabetes, and other problems related to obesity. Your risk is very great if your BMI is 30 or more.

It's best to lose weight slowly (no more than 1 to 2 pounds per week) by making small changes in your diet and activity level. A sudden drastic change in your lifestyle is hard to maintain. Losing just 5 to 10 pounds may lower your risk of health problems. We can give you suggestions for diet and exercise changes.

We recommend that you bring your body mass index down to 26.

Acupuncture may be of benefit for your problem.

Acupuncture is done by inserting very thin needles into the body. They are inserted at specific points. We are not sure how acupuncture works. It is based on the belief that energy flows through pathways. These pathways are called meridians. They go all over the body. Meridians do not match exactly to western medicine concepts, like nerves and blood vessels. The theory is that pain and disease may be a sign that energy flow is blocked. This treatment may help clear the energy flow.

A possible way to explain how this treatment works in western medical terms is that the needles stimulate the nervous system. In doing this, they cause chemicals to be released in the body. These chemicals may block pain or change how pain is felt. They may stimulate the body's natural healing abilities. This may promote physical and emotional well-being.

One treatment may be enough to take care of a problem that only recently started bothering you. If you've had the problem for a while, you may need a series of treatments. Chronic problems like arthritis may need regular treatments.

The needles used in this treatment are solid metal and very thin. They are not like the thicker hollow needles used to draw blood or give shots. The needles are inserted ¼ to 1 inch beneath the skin. You may feel cramping. You may feel a heaviness or distention. There might be a tingling or electric sensation around the needle. You may feel this traveling away from the needle. The discomfort should be mild. It helps if you relax and keep still. If you are feeling

nervous or the discomfort gets worse, tell the person treating you. They may need to readjust the needles. You may feel energized or relaxed during the treatment. You may not feel anything.

This treatment uses sterilized needles. They are individually packaged and disposable. The FDA requires that needles be thrown away after each use. Ask if your provider uses laser-sharpened needles. These may cause less discomfort.

Choose an acupuncturist the same way you would choose any health care provider. Some medical doctors are trained in this technique. You may want to ask where the practitioner trained and how long the training was. You may want to ask how long the person has been in practice. You can ask what experience the person has in treating problems like yours. Not all states require acupuncturists to obtain a license. If your state does not license these providers, look for one who is certified by a national organization. Organizations that certify acupuncturists include:

- National Commission for the Certification of Acupuncturists
- American Academy of Medical Acupuncture
- The National Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Alliance

The American Association of Oriental Medicine may be able to provide a list of qualified acupuncturists in your area.

Precautions:

Call Your Physician if:

The pain is not better in 1 week.

The pain seems worse.

You have pain or numbness from your back to your hip and leg.

You lose weight without trying to.

Your bowel movements are hard, difficult to push out, or if several days have gone by without a bowel movement.

Your temperature is higher than 101F.

Seek Immediate Medical Attention if:

You have signs of dangerous pressure on the nerves in your pelvis.

Your leg is numb, cold, or tingling.

Low Back Pain, Chronic

What is it?

Back pain that lasts longer than several weeks or even months is called chronic back pain. Most back pain goes away in a month or two. Lower back pain is common. Eight out of ten Americans have pain in the lower back some time in their lives. Out of these, about 1 in 20 develops chronic back pain.

What is the cause?

Most low back pain is a result of a problem with either the muscles or the spine. Your spine is made up of vertebrae. These are bones that sit on top of each other like blocks. Ligaments and muscles allow the vertebrae in the lower part of your spine to move in different directions. There are cushions between the vertebrae called discs. Nerves pass very close to these discs. When ligaments in your back are injured, the muscles in your back may tighten. They do this to keep the lower back from moving. This tightening causes the spasms you may feel in your lower back.

Sometimes a disc is injured. It may bulge out between the vertebrae. This can put pressure on the nerves close by. It doesn't take much to injure the back. Some back injuries are caused by lifting a heavy object. Some are caused by falling down. Sitting for long periods may cause back pain. It can also be caused by twisting or simply standing up.

Sometimes people have continued pain even though we cannot find a specific injury. It is not known why some people continue to have chronic lower back pain. You may be re-injuring your back before it has a chance to heal. Some chronic back pain may be from a disease that affects the spine, such as arthritis. At this point we do not think that is the cause of your pain.

The following increase your risk for chronic low back pain.

- Being too heavy
- Not exercising
- Not knowing how to lift correctly
- Being unhappy or depressed

What are the symptoms?

The pain of chronic lower back pain usually comes and goes. The pain may be worse when you sit or stand still. It may get better when you walk or change positions. There may be times when you have no pain at all. At other times the pain may feel severe. If there is pressure on a nerve, you may feel pain going down the back of a leg.

People with chronic lower back pain often feel frustrated. The pain can affect your ability to earn a living. It often puts stress on family life. Pain pills or muscle relaxant medications may affect your ability to think clearly. You may feel angry that doctors don't seem to be able to help you.

How is it treated?

When back pain lasts longer than several weeks, we may do X-rays or other tests. The purpose is to see if you have a problem that could be fixed by surgery. However, most people with chronic back pain are not helped by surgery. We also want to make sure you do not have a disease that is causing your symptoms.

The most important thing to do is remain physically active. Bed rest will weaken your back muscles and make the condition worse. Walking is one of the best exercises to strengthen and heal your back. Swimming and biking are also good. We may give you other exercises to do as well. Do these exercises even if they cause a little pain. Back pain often will not improve until you exercise. Do not do a specific exercise if it causes pain that spreads beyond the area that already hurts, however. Talk to us if exercising is difficult for you.

Studies have shown that a hard mattress is not as good for back pain as a mattress of medium firmness.

Avoid re-injuring your back. It is important to know how to lift objects and how to stand. We may have you see a physical therapist to teach you some of these things. It may be necessary to lose weight.

Chiropractors can help many people with back pain. If you see one, be sure you are given instructions on exercise.

Acupuncture may also help. In this type of treatment, fine needles are inserted a little way into the skin. This appears to help the body block pain.

Low doses of acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) or naproxen (Naprosyn) may help to relieve pain. However, these medicines can cause problems if used regularly for a long time. Stronger pain medicine should be avoided when possible. Other medicines such as muscle relaxants are sometimes prescribed for short periods.

We may suggest that you see a counselor if you are feeling depressed or don't know how to cope. We may send you to a special pain clinic.

What can I expect?

Chronic back pain can be difficult to treat. There may not be a quick solution. Those who stay physically active in spite of their pain do better in the long run. Most back pain improves over time. However, even after it is better you are at risk for re-injuring your back.

What to watch for.

Get immediate help if you are numb in the groin or have difficulty going to the bathroom. Get immediate help if you suddenly have accidental loss of urine or stool. Let us know if your back pain is not getting at all better. Let us know if your pain seems worse after going to bed. Let us know if a leg or foot doesn't seem to work properly or if you have weakness in a muscle. Let us know if a leg or foot is numb.

Sciatica, Acute

What is it?

Sciatica is a type of back problem where pain goes down the buttock or leg. The sciatic nerve is a large nerve that comes out of the spine in the low back. There is one on each side. Each sciatic nerve runs through the buttock down the back of the leg into the foot.

What is the cause?

Sciatica is caused by irritation of the sciatic nerve. Between each of the bones in the back is a round cushion, called a disc. Injury to the back can cause part of the disc to bulge out. This bulge can push against or irritate nerves in the back. If this happens in the low back, it can lead to sciatica. This is the most common cause of sciatica.

However, sciatica can be caused by anything that irritates the sciatic nerve. This may include an inflamed muscle, a bony spur, slipped vertebrae, or narrowing of the spinal canal. An injury could have happened lifting something or from a fall. You may not remember any injury.

What are the symptoms?

The pain usually goes down one leg only. You may feel it in the buttock, the back of the thigh, or the hip. Usually it spreads down into the lower leg. You may or may not have low back pain also. The pain may feel like a dull ache or it may be sharp and shooting. You may have numbness or tingling. Sitting or standing for long periods of time often makes the pain worse. Bending over, twisting, or lifting heavy things can also increase pain. Lifting either leg up may cause pain on the affected side. The pain may get worse when you cough or sneeze.

How is it treated?

When pain is severe, you may need to rest in bed for 1 or 2 days. Most people get better within 4 to 6 weeks. When you are ready we may give you some gentle exercises to strengthen the muscles of your stomach and back. Walking is one of the best exercises for many people with back problems. If you must sit at a desk or in a car, lumbar pads may be helpful.

We may give you medicine to help ease your pain. Sometimes we use medicine to treat the inflammation of the nerves. We may give you medicine to help relieve muscle spasm. We may have you see a physical therapist for treatments and exercises. Here, you will also learn how to avoid future injury to your back.

What can I expect?

We expect your sciatica to improve completely. Some people who get sciatica have problems with it later in life. If it comes back, it is treated the same way as the first time it occurred. Rarely, sciatica does not get better after several weeks and we may need to do more tests. If the pain is not responding to treatment we may suggest a spinal injection. Sometimes back surgery is the best way to treat your problem.

What to watch for.

- Call us right away or seek immediate care if you have:
- Numbness in your groin
- Numbness down both legs
- Weakness in your leg
- Problems with urine or bowel control or are unable to urinate

Let us know if your pain does not improve.

Strain, Lumbar

What is it?

A muscle strain occurs when you overuse a muscle. Tissues in the muscle tear slightly. The tissues may swell (become inflamed).

What is the cause?

Most muscle strains are usually what we call an overuse injury. The muscle has been used too hard or too long. Overuse injuries often happen when a person does not warm up and stretch the muscles before exercise. It is a common problem in people who start a new exercise or activity.

Back strains often occur when people try to lift something that is too heavy or lift it incorrectly.

Being out of shape or overweight can increase your risk of straining a back muscle.

What are the symptoms?

You have pain on one or both sides of the back. You may have felt the muscle tear or pop when you injured it. The pain may get worse when you move. Your back may feel tight. You may have tenderness or swelling over one spot in your back.

How is it treated?

We may suggest that you put an ice or cold pack on the sore muscle for the first day or two. After that, heat or cold packs can help healing. We may suggest a pain reliever such as aspirin, acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil or Nuprin), or naproxen (Aleve). We may prescribe a medicine to help relieve spasm of your muscles.

Staying in bed is not recommended. Your back may tighten up even more and take longer to heal. Avoid activities that cause pain. If possible, take walks. Walking is one of the best things you can do for your back injury.

We may give you some gentle exercises to stretch and strengthen your back. We may suggest physical therapy. We may show you how to lift correctly so you can avoid straining your back again.

What can I expect?

You should be able to resume your normal activities in a few days. The pain and stiffness will slowly improve. Avoid heavy lifting until your back has had a chance to heal.

What to watch for.

Let us know immediately if you feel numbness in your groin or down both legs. Also let us know immediately if you have any difficulty controlling your bladder. Call us if you have tingling or pain that moves into one buttock or down one leg. Let us know if your pain is not improving.