Managing Low Back Pain

VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guidelines
Low Back Pain

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If you have low back pain, you are not alone. Nearly everyone at some point has back pain that interferes with work, routine daily activities, or fun. Back pain is one of the most common physical complaints. It is the fifth most common reason for health care provider visits. Fortunately, most low back pain goes away within a few days. Most of the time, low back pain can be managed with self-care. For those who have pain that takes longer to resolve or have chronic pain, your healthcare team has a variety of treatments and referrals. The good news is most people with chronic low back pain will not need surgery.

Your Back at a Glance

Your back is an amazing part of your body made up of bones, muscles, nerves, ligaments and tendons. Your spine begins at your neck and runs down to your tailbone. Blocks of bone, called vertebrae, are stacked together to support your weight and protect your spinal cord. Between the vertebrae are the intervertebral discs. The discs are tough, flexible shock absorbers that cushion the vertebrae. Strong bands of tissue known as ligaments and tendons help to hold the bones of your spine in place and attach the large muscles of your back to the bones. All together, when these parts work in harmony, they make your back strong and you are able to move and bend without difficulty.

Most of the motion in your back happens in your lower back. This part of your back, where you tend to feel most back pain, supports the weight of your body and allows you to move.
The exact cause of low back pain can be hard to pinpoint at times. Maybe you helped your neighbor move and used your back more than you are used to or possibly you lifted something the wrong way. You may have stood or sat too long in one position so now the muscles are stiff and sore. If you work out for the first time in a while and do a lot of push-ups, you expect your upper arm muscles to be sore the next day. The same goes for your back muscles.

Your back pain may have come on gradually during the day or you may have noticed it during the night or when you woke up. Your back may feel stiff and sore or you may have sharp or burning pain. Sometimes people have tingling, or a ‘pins-and-needles’ feeling. Up to 85% of people will experience back pain at some time in their lives – it is that common! The good news is it usually only lasts for a few days or weeks. Every now and then, it lasts a bit longer, up to 4 or 6 weeks, but that’s less common. Back pain that lasts 12 weeks or less is considered "acute" pain. When it lasts longer than 12 weeks, back pain is considered “chronic”.

Is Back Pain Serious?

Most of the time, low back pain is not serious and is not the result of a back/spine injury. Back pain is a symptom, not a disease. Very serious low back problems are rare. Although on occasion someone will be able to pinpoint when their back started to hurt or ache, most people don’t actually remember hurting their back. Your spine and the body parts that work with it are very strong, so it’s difficult to have a serious back injury.
When should you see your health care provider?

See your health care provider if any of the following problems occur within a few days of your back injury or the onset of your back pain:

- Pain that keeps you from moving.
- Pain that runs down a leg.
- Night pain that keeps you from sleeping.
- Pain that increases after a few days rest.
- Pain that does not lessen after rest and self treatment.

Seek immediate attention from your health care provider if you have any of the following with back pain:

- Difficulty controlling your bladder or bowels.
- Loss of sensation in the groin area or between your legs.
- Pain following a fall or impact to the back.
- Severe leg pain down both legs, weakness, tingling, numbness, or inability to move.
- Pain that is steadily increasing over several hours.
- Chills, fever, or night sweats.
- Difficulty with balance or coordination.

What Can You Do If You Have Back Pain?

Remaining active is an important key in managing low back pain. Although this may be hard to do when you are having pain, research shows us that being inactive can actually make your back pain worse.

Despite having pain, there is good news. Most who experience low back pain will have rapid improvement in the first month.
The best thing to do is to remain active and be conservative with X-rays and MRI testing. Even if the x-ray shows a little arthritis, this can be normal and is no reason to be concerned. The latest research also shows that as long as there is no injury, specific disease or spinal abnormality, serious or permanent damage is rare. Additionally, the rare conditions that are serious or can cause permanent damage can be initially identified by your healthcare provider by a focused history and physical exam.

One of the worst things you can do is stay in bed. You can actually weaken your bones and muscles which may make the pain worse.

What Are My Options?

Actions you can take:

- Most back pain resulting from minor strains can be resolved with over-the-counter medicines and simple self-treatment.

- If the pain gets better as time passes, or the pain is not the result of a serious injury, then successful low back treatment by yourself is possible.

- Avoid the use of bed rest and prolonged inactivity.

- Use the exercises in this booklet to help your back and abdomen.

- Stay active, keep moving.
Self-Care Guidelines

Over-the-Counter Medicines*

Over-the-counter (OTC) medicines are available without a prescription. They are very effective for reducing inflammation, swelling, and pain. OTC pain relievers include acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®) and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory (NSAID) drugs such as aspirin, ibuprofen (e.g. Advil® or Motrin® IB), and naproxen sodium (e.g. Aleve®). Caution: You should not take two similar drugs such as aspirin, ibuprofen, (Advil, Motrin), or naproxen sodium together. It is safe to combine acetaminophen (Tylenol) with a NSAID.

OTCs are medicines and you should take them with caution. Do not exceed the recommended dosage of a medication without consulting with your healthcare provider. If you are taking other medicines, nutritional supplements or herbal remedies, talk with your health care provider or pharmacist to be sure an OTC medicine will not negatively interact with any of the prescription drugs you are taking.

Treatment Without Medication

There are many safe and effective ways to relieve your low back pain without using medication. Sometimes these techniques are used in combination with drug treatments. Many of these pain relief methods can be used at home; others require the help of a health care provider. Remember to talk with your health care provider about any pain relief techniques you are planning to use.

Ice

- For a day or two, apply ice or a cold pack for about 20 minutes at a time, three or four times a day.

- Always wrap ice or cold packs in a thin protective layer - such as a towel or face cloth. This will protect your skin. A bag of frozen peas makes a great ice pack.

Heat

- If ice has not relieved the pain after 2 or 3 days, apply moist heat.
  - Wrap a hot water bottle in a towel or take a warm shower.
  - Apply moist heat about 15 to 20 minutes, two or three times a day.

- Do not use heat if you injured your back in a fall, or if the heat increases your symptoms.

Bed Rest

Staying in bed more than a few days can make you stiff and cause supporting back muscles to become weaker; some movement is necessary to heal properly. Bed rest is a consequence of having pain, not a form of treatment for low back pain. Get active as soon as you can.
Recovery from an acute injury takes some time. It is important to increase your activity gradually so you do not increase your discomfort. If you suffer from an acute back injury:

- Perform stretches in a smooth motion and hold the position for a few seconds; do not bounce or jerk while stretching.

- Do these stretches and exercises after a day or two of rest, if rest is necessary.

- You may experience some discomfort when doing these exercises. If the discomfort increases and remains the following day, consult your health care provider. Keep moving.

- Begin aerobic exercise as soon as you can. Aerobic exercise will promote blood flow and healing. Examples of aerobic exercise are walking, swimming, stationary bike and the elliptical machine.

- Begin by performing your aerobic program continuously for 10-20 minutes every other day. If you do not have increased pain after 1 week, increase this activity by 5 minutes every other day. Your goal should be at least 30 minutes of continuous aerobic exercise at least 3 times per week.
Press-Ups

Lie on your stomach with your legs straight and feet together.

Prop up your upper body with your forearms.

Push upward while keeping your pelvis on the floor.

Hold for five seconds.

Gently lower yourself to the floor.

Repeat five times.

(Remember to keep your forearms in contact with the floor at all times.)
Backward Stretch

Stand upright.

Place your feet a shoulder width apart.

Place your hands on your lower back.

Lean backward while keeping your neck straight.

Lean further back until you feel a slight stretch in your back.

Hold for a count of five.

Return to the upright position.

Repeat three or four times.
Lower Back and Hip Stretch

Lie on your back with knees bent and feet flat on the floor.

Press your lower back onto the floor.

Grasp one knee with both hands and pull toward your chest keeping your head on the floor.

Keep the other knee bent with your foot on the floor.

Hold for a count of ten.

Return to starting position.

Repeat with the other leg.

Repeat ten times on each leg for three sets.
Pelvic Tilt

Lie on your back.

Bend your knees at a 90-degree angle.

Tighten stomach muscles and buttocks.

Slowly push your lower back downward.

Hold your back in this position for five seconds.

Slowly return to normal and relax.

Repeat five times.
Getting Out of Bed

Roll on your side and push your body up with your arms.

Bend your knees and lower your feet to the floor. Use your legs to lift your entire body.
Sleeping

Sleep on a firm, comfortable mattress. If the mattress is too soft, insert a board under the mattress for firmness.

Sleep on your back with a pillow under your knees or on your side with a pillow between your bent knees.

Sleep on a contoured pillow (with a shallow curve for the head) to help keep your neck and spine aligned during sleep.
Getting into a vehicle

Use the door to help you sit.

Grasp the steering wheel for support when seated, and slowly swing both legs into the car.

If you use a seat pad or back support, secure it to the seat to prevent slippage.

Getting out of a vehicle

Use the steering wheel as leverage to help pivot your lower body out of the car.

If possible, slowly swing legs out of the car at the same time to prevent twisting your back.

Use the door for support as you raise your body with your legs.
Sitting

While sitting at work or at home, try to maintain good posture.

Keep your knees at a 90-degree angle.

Keep your feet flat on the floor or on a footrest.

Use a back support or a rolled up towel to support the normal curvature of your lower back.

Keep your ears, shoulders, and hips in a straight line perpendicular to the floor.

Bend your elbows at about 90 degrees, with your wrists parallel to the floor.

Allow your arms to rest on the soft armrests of a chair. This will also relieve some compression on your lower back.
Lifting

When lifting, keep the object close to your body.

If the object is on the floor, widen your stance (slightly outside of shoulder width) and bend only at the hips and the knees.

Keep your back in its normal arched position while lifting.
Lifting (cont)

Do not lift by bending forward and using your lower back.

Do not twist while you are lifting.

Take a breath in before lifting and breathe out as you exert yourself during the lift.

Tighten your stomach muscles and begin the upward lift by using your legs.

If you are carrying the object, be sure to keep it close to your body and maintain a straight spine.
How You Do Things Matters!
X-RAYS

Your health care provider may order x-rays if you have persistent or recurrent low back pain. X-rays are usually not necessary in the beginning of low back pain treatment. This is because back muscles, ligaments, and discs do not show up on x-rays. X-rays are necessary for significant trauma (a fall or blow to the back), or for older patients with severe degenerative conditions (brittle bones).

Surgery

Surgery is most often not needed for low back pain. Nonsurgical treatments, exercise, and good body mechanics are usually effective at relieving low back pain. For complicated disc injury, surgical treatment may be necessary depending on the type of back injury. Consult your health care provider about surgical options.

Specialist Referral

Your primary care manager will only refer you to a specialist if you have specific symptoms, test results or findings on physical exam. Most back pain will resolve if you follow a well researched treatment plan from your primary care provider.
Keep moving, stay active.

Learn to lift things the right way.

Lose weight. Extra pounds, especially around the middle, increase stress on the lower back.

Don’t smoke. Smoking can interfere with blood circulation to the lower back, while a constant cough can bring on a back spasm.

Reduce stress. Economic worries, family pressures, and fatigue can cause back spasms or tense muscles.

Daily exercise is an excellent way to relieve stress.

Walk short distances instead of driving.

Climb a few flights of stairs instead of taking the elevator.

Choose a sport that is easy on your back such as walking, swimming, or bicycling in an upright position.

Be aware there are times when immediate medical attention is required.

Remember, most back pain from minor strains can be resolved with over-the-counter medicines and simple home treatment.
Chronic back pain does not mean there is damage. The back is designed for a lot of movement so the sooner you are active, the better. If possible, stay at work and make simple changes in how you do your job. It’s common for people with low back pain to also have stress, anxiety or depression and it’s important to get treatment for these symptoms as well. If your pain does not go away, your health care provider can check for more serious problems and suggest other treatments that may help.