

Coping With Back Pain

Many individuals have an occasional backache, but when the pain becomes severe or you experience the pain more frequently you should consult a doctor.

POSSIBLE CAUSES OF BACK PAIN:

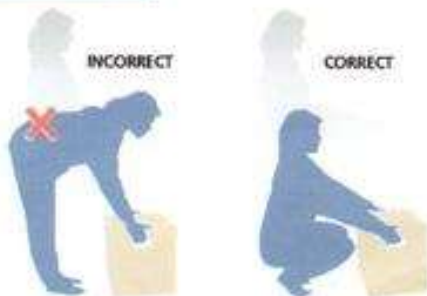
Some common causes of back pain are:

- Stretched or strained muscles in the back
- Injuries (such as from a fall) that cause trauma to muscles, bones, or other tissues in the back
- **Herniated** (or "slipped") **disks** (this occurs when part of a disk that provides cushioning between 2 vertebrae—the bony structures that make up the backbone or spinal column—bulges out, which can cause pressure on surrounding tissue, such as nerves)
- **Osteoporosis** (decreased density of the bones)—can cause vertebrae to become fractured or compressed
- Being overweight
- Bad posture
- Being pregnant

Back pain can be a symptom of a number of other medical problems. Therefore, your doctor may ask you a number of questions about other symptoms you may be experiencing along with your back pain.

PROTECTING YOUR BACK WHEN LIFTING:

- Lift with leg muscles not back muscles; bend your knees (by squatting down to pick up object) not your waist or back
- Keep back straight (do not bend over) while lifting
- Keep the weight of what you are lifting close to your body
- Do not twist when lifting



Additional Sources: National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, American Academy of Family Physicians, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, The AMA Home Medical Library, The AMA Family Medical Guide, The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine

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An article in the December 6, 2000, issue of *JAMA* discusses the reports on a study of frequent use of a back belt (a belt designed to protect the back from possible injury when lifting) by workers who lift merchandise. The researchers did not find any benefits to using a back belt.

SELF-HELP IDEAS FOR EASING BACK PAIN:

- Short periods of rest lying flat on your back with your knees raised (by a pillow, for example); long periods of bed rest may weaken the muscles, adding to the problem and increasing the time to recover
- Limited rest combined with gentle exercise and lighter than normal activities
- Taking nonprescription pain relievers and/or anti-inflammatory medications following the manufacturer's instructions

Consult your doctor if the above strategies do not work for you. Your doctor may prescribe anti-inflammatory drugs, drugs that relax the muscles, and/or painkillers. Under severe conditions, back pain caused by structural problems with the backbone may require surgery.

PREVENTING BACK PAIN:

- Get regular exercise
- Stretch before exercise and other physical activities
- Do exercises to strengthen and make back muscles more flexible
- Do exercises to strengthen the abdominal muscles
- Always keep a good posture when standing and sitting
- Avoid standing or being in one position for too long a period of time
- Lose weight if you are overweight

WHEN TO SEE A DOCTOR:

- If you experience:
- Severe pain that makes it difficult to move
 - Fever and/or vomiting with the back pain
 - Pain, numbness, or tingling in another part of your body
 - Weakness in another part of your body
 - Bowel problems or bladder problems, such as losing control of going to the bathroom
 - Pain that lasts for more than 3 to 4 days

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
800/824-BONES or www.aaos.org
Send a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope to:
Low Back Pain
American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
P.O. Box 2058
Des Plaines, IL 60017
- American Academy of Family Physicians
Low Back Pain: Tips on Pain Relief and Prevention
800/274-2237, extension 5103
or familydoctor.org/healthfacts/117/index.html

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site (www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm). A JAMA Patient Page on low back pain was published June 19, 1998.

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Exercises in the Treatment of Low-Back Pain

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Exercise is an important part of treating—and preventing—back pain. Your doctor will show you which exercises are right for you and tell you how often, how long, and in what order you should do them. Often, relief for back pain is a goal that can only be achieved by a team approach of physician, therapist, and patient. Your full participation is essential.

Part 1. Initial Exercises

The exercises your doctor recommends as you begin treatment will help you control pain and maintain muscle tone. When done correctly, these exercises should cause little or no pain. Figures 1 through 4 demonstrate some exercises to help you begin.

Figures: Terry Boles. © 2001

FIGURE 1. Pelvic tilt



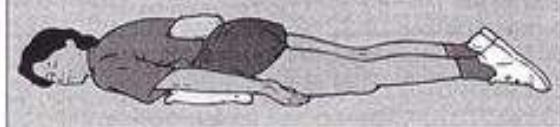
Lie on your back with both knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Flatten the small of your back against the floor, without pushing down with your legs. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10 times.

FIGURE 2. Knee to chest



Lie on your back with both knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Bring one knee to your chest and hold for 10 seconds. Lower your foot to the floor and repeat with the opposite leg. Repeat 5 times. As you progress, bring one knee to your chest, then the other. Hold both knees and repeat as before.

FIGURE 3. Prone lying



Lie on your stomach with your arms placed along your sides and head turned to one side. A small pillow under your hips and an ice pack wrapped in a towel may provide additional pain relief. Maintain this position for 3 to 5 minutes.

FIGURE 4A. Prone lying on elbows



Lie on your stomach with your weight on your elbows and forearms and your hips on the floor. Relax your lower back for 3 to 5 minutes.

FIGURE 4B. Prone press-up



As you progress, work up to the prone press-up. Lie on your stomach with your hands on the floor near your shoulders. Slowly push your upper body off the floor by straightening your arms, keeping your hips on the floor. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10 times.



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continued

Part 2. Stabilization and Strengthening Exercises

As you get stronger, the next goal is to improve back strength and function. Figures 5 through 9 show exercises that are designed to stabilize the spine while keeping it in a safe position.

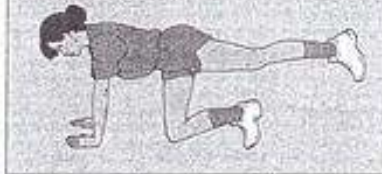
Start on your hands and knees, maintaining a straight lower back. Lift one arm straight up next to your ear. Try not to twist your body. Hold the arm parallel to the floor for 5 seconds. Return to the starting position and repeat 10 times. Then repeat with the other arm.

FIGURE 5. Arm reach



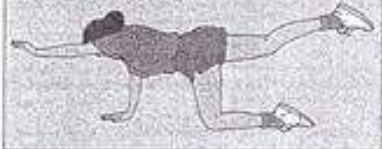
Start on your hands and knees, maintaining a straight lower back. Extend one leg out behind you. Try not to twist your body. Hold the leg parallel to the floor for 5 seconds. Return to the starting position and repeat 10 times. Then repeat with the other leg.

FIGURE 6. Leg reach



Start on your hands and knees, maintaining a straight lower back. Lift one arm straight up next to your ear. Then extend the opposite leg out behind you. Try not to twist. Hold the arm and leg parallel to the floor for 5 seconds. Return to the starting position and repeat 10 times. Then repeat with the opposite arm and leg.

FIGURE 7. Quadruped



Lie on your back with both knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Raise your hips and your lower back from the floor, keeping your lower back straight. Hold the position for 5 seconds. Relax and repeat 10 times.

FIGURE 8. Bridging



Lie on your back with both knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Slowly curl your head and shoulders off the floor. Hold briefly for 1 to 2 seconds, then relax. Do 10 to 20 times.

FIGURE 9. Partial sit-up



Part 3. Hip and Hamstring Stretches

Tight hip and hamstring muscles often contribute to low-back pain. Exercises that stretch these muscles (figures 10 and 11) are an essential part of recovery and may prevent new pain from developing.

Lie on your back with your knees bent. Loop a towel or belt around one foot. Slowly raise and straighten your leg until you feel a stretch in your hamstrings. Hold the position for 30 seconds and release. Repeat with the other leg.

FIGURE 10. Hamstring muscle stretch



Kneel with your left foot in front of you. Slowly shift your weight forward, keeping your back straight. Lift your stomach muscles and push your left buttock toward the floor; hold for 30 seconds. Relax and return to the starting position. Repeat with the opposite leg. **PSM**

FIGURE 11. Hip flexor muscle stretch



Remember: This information is not intended as a substitute for medical treatment. Before starting an exercise program, consult a physician.

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