



# Dealing with Back Pain

Back pain can range from a dull constant ache to a sudden sharp pain that makes it hard to move. Pain can start quickly, may be the result of incorrect lifting or may be progressive.

## WHO GETS BACK PAIN?

Anyone can have back pain, but things that may increase your risk are:

- Age — Back pain is more common the older you get. Many people do not have back pain until they are over the age of 30.
- Physical Fitness — Back pain is more common in people who are not physically fit.
- Overweight — A diet high in calories and fat can make you gain weight. Too much weight can stress your back and cause pain.
- Heredity — Some back pain can be caused by a genetic factor.
- Your job — If you have to lift, push or pull while twisting your back, you may get back pain. Working at a desk all day may cause back pain if you do not sit up straight while you work.
- Smoking — Your body may not be able to get enough nutrients to the disks in your back if you smoke. Smokers cough may also cause back pain. People who smoke are slow to heal, so back pain may last longer.

## WHAT CAUSES BACK PAIN?

Mechanical Problems:

- Disk breakdown
- Spasms
- Tense muscles
- Ruptured disks
- Injuries from sprains, fractures, accidents and falls

Diseases or Conditions, Such As:

- Scoliosis
- Arthritis
- Pregnancy
- Infections
- Fibromyalgia
- Spondylolisthesis
- Spinal Stenosis
- Kidney Stones
- Endometriosis

## HOW CAN BACK PAIN BE PREVENTED?

- Exercise will keep your back muscles strong
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Get enough Calcium and Vitamin D daily to keep bones strong
- Stand up straight and avoid heavy lifting. If you do lift something heavy, bend your legs and keep your back straight.



## WHEN SHOULD I SEE A DOCTOR FOR PAIN?

- Numbness or Tingling
- Severe pain that does not improve with rest
- Pain after a fall or an injury
- Pain with any of these problems:
  - Trouble Urinating
  - Weakness
  - Numbness in your legs
  - Fever
  - Weight loss when not on a diet

## ACUTE OR CHRONIC BACK PAIN?

Acute pain starts quickly and lasts less than 6 weeks. It is the most common type of back pain. Acute pain may be caused by things like falling, being tackled in football, or lifting something heavy. Chronic pain lasts for more than 3 months and is much less common than acute pain.

## HOW IS BACK PAIN TREATED?

Treatment for back pain depends on what kind of pain you have. Acute back pain usually gets better without any treatment, but you may want to take acetaminophen, aspirin, or ibuprofen to help ease the pain. Exercise and surgery are not usually used to treat acute back pain.

Here are some types of treatments for chronic back pain:

**Hot or cold packs** — These can soothe sore, stiff backs. Heat reduces muscle spasms and pain. Cold helps reduce swelling and numbs deep pain. Using hot or cold packs may relieve pain, but this treatment does not fix the cause of chronic back pain.

**Exercise** — Proper exercise can help ease chronic pain but should not be used for acute back pain. Your doctor or physical therapist can tell you the best types of exercise to do.

**Medications** — The following are the main types of medications used for back pain:

- Analgesic medications are over-the-counter drugs such as acetaminophen and aspirin or prescription pain medications
- Topical analgesics are creams, ointments, and salves rubbed onto the skin over the site of pain.
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS) are drugs that reduce both pain and swelling. NSAIDS

**Behavior Changes** — You can learn to lift, push and pull with less stress on your back. Changing how you exercise, relax and sleep can help lessen back pain. Eating a healthy diet and not smoking also help.

**Injections** — Your doctor may suggest steroid or numbing shots to lessen your pain.

**Complementary and alternative medical treatments** — When back pain becomes chronic or when other treatments do not relieve it, some people try complementary and alternative treatments. The most common of these treatments are:

- Manipulation — Professionals use their hands to adjust or massage the spine or nearby tissues.
- Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) — A small box over the painful area sends mild electrical pulses to nerves. Studies have shown that TENS treatments are not always effective for reducing pain.
- Acupuncture — This Chinese practice uses thin needles to relieve pain and restore health. Acupuncture may be effective when used as a part of a comprehensive treatment plan for low back pain.
- Acupressure — A therapist applies pressure to certain places in the body to relieve pain. Acupressure has not been well studied for back pain.

**Surgery** — Most people with chronic back pain do not need surgery. It is usually used for chronic back pain if other treatments do not work. You may need surgery if you have:

- Herniated disk — when one or more of the disks that cushion the bones of the spine are damaged, the jelly-like center of the disk leaks, causing pain.
- Spinal Stenosis — This condition causes the spinal canal to become narrow.
- Spondylolisthesis — This occurs when one or more bones of the spine slip out of place.
- Vertebral fracture — A fracture can be caused by a blow to the spine or by crumbling of the bone due to osteoporosis.
- Degenerative disk disease — As people age, some have disks that break down and cause severe pain.

Rarely, when back pain is caused by a tumor, an infection or a nerve root problem called cauda equina syndrome, surgery is needed right away to ease the pain and prevent more problems.

### REFERENCES:

*What is Back Pain?* (2009). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, Bethesda, Maryland