

# What is Back Pain?

Back pain can range from a dull, constant ache to a sudden, sharp pain that makes it hard to move. It can start quickly if you fall or lift something too heavy, or it can get worse slowly.

## Who Gets Back Pain?

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

- **Getting older.** Back pain is more common the older you get. You may first have back pain when you are 30 to 40 years old.
- **Poor physical fitness.** Back pain is more common in people who are not fit.
- **Being overweight.** A diet high in calories and fat can make you gain weight. Too much weight can stress the back and cause pain.
- **Heredity.** Some causes of back pain, such as *ankylosing spondylitis*, a form of arthritis that affects the spine, can have a genetic component.
- **Other diseases.** Some types of arthritis and cancer can cause back pain.
- **Your job.** If you have to lift, push, or pull while twisting your spine, you may get back pain. If you work at a desk all day and do not sit up straight, you may also get back pain.
- **Smoking.** Your body may not be able to get enough nutrients to the disks in your back if you smoke. Smoker's cough may also cause back pain. People who smoke are slow to heal, so back pain may last longer.

## What Causes Back Pain?

The most common cause of back pain is muscle tension or spasm. This kind of back pain almost always goes away with time and gentle activity (stretching and walking).

Mechanical problems with the back itself can cause pain. Examples are:

- **Tense muscles**
- **Ruptured disks**
- **Disk breakdown**
- **Spasms**

Injuries from sprains, fractures, accidents, and falls can result in back pain.

Back pain can also occur with some conditions and diseases, such as *scoliosis*, *spondylolisthesis*, *arthritis*, *spinal stenosis*, *pregnancy*, *kidney stones*, *infections*, *endometriosis*, or *fibromyalgia*.

Another possible cause of back pain is stress. It is very rare that cancer is a cause of back pain, unless someone has had cancer in the past.



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## Can Back Pain be Prevented?

The best things you can do to prevent back pain are:

- **Exercise often** and keep your back muscles strong.
- **Walk often.** Walking keeps your stomach and back muscles healthy.
- **Maintain a healthy weight** or **lose weight** if you weigh too much. To have strong bones, you need to get enough calcium and vitamin D every day.
- **Try to stand up straight** and **avoid heavy lifting** when you can. If you do lift something heavy, bend your legs and keep your back straight.

## When Should I See a Doctor for Pain?

Most back pain goes away on its own after a few weeks. You can treat back pain with stretching, walking, heat packs, ice packs, and over-the-counter pain medicine. You should see a doctor if you have:

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

## How is Back Pain Diagnosed?

To diagnose back pain, your provider will take your medical history and do a physical exam. Tests are not needed for back pain unless you have back pain longer than three months, or if you have warning signs of a serious disease.

In these cases, your doctor may order tests, such as:

- **X-rays**
- **Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)**
- **Computed tomography (CT) scan**
- **Blood tests**

Medical tests may not show the cause of your back pain. Medical tests do not make the pain go away faster. Many times, the cause of back pain is never known. Back pain usually gets better even if you do not know the cause.

## What is the Difference Between Acute and Chronic 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. Other than in serious accidents or diseases, surgery is not needed for acute back pain.

Following are some types of treatments for chronic back pain.

### *Hot or Cold Packs (or Both)*

Hot or cold packs 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:

- **Pain medications** are over-the-counter drugs such as acetaminophen and aspirin or prescription pain medications.
- **Topical pain medicines** are creams, ointments, and salves rubbed onto the skin over the site of pain. Many of these are over the counter and can be soothing.
- **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs** (NSAIDs) are drugs that reduce both pain and swelling. NSAIDs include over-the-counter drugs such as ibuprofen, ketoprofen, and naproxen sodium.

- **Muscle relaxants** and some **antidepressants** may be prescribed for some types of back pain, but these do not work for every type of back pain.

### *Behavioral 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 if you have the type of pain that runs down your leg. These injections do not help pain that is just in your back.

### *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.
- **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.
- **Stress reduction and holistic approaches.** Some complementary therapists are able to give you advice and treatments for managing stress, which can help back pain.

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## **Surgery**

Most people with chronic back pain do not need surgery. It is only helpful if there is a specific, fixable problem causing pain down the leg as well as the back (such as a herniated disk that has not gotten better after three months). You may need surgery if you have:

- **Herniated disk** that has not improved after three or more months, and is causing severe pain down one of the legs. (Most herniated disks get better without surgery.) 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. Surgery is sometimes needed if the condition affects your ability to walk and function.
- **Spondylolisthesis.** This occurs when one or more bones of the spine slip out of place. Surgery is sometimes needed if this movement **is causing pressure on a nerve.**
- **Degenerative disk disease** causing pressure on a nerve and pain down a leg, that does not improve after at least three months. 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.

Source:

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), [www.niams.nih.gov](http://www.niams.nih.gov)

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