

Back Pain, Emergency or Urgent Symptoms: Care Instructions



Overview

Many people have back pain at one time or another. In most cases, pain gets better with self-care that includes over-the-counter pain medicine, ice, heat, and exercises.

Unless you have symptoms of a severe injury or heart attack, you may be able to give yourself a few days before you call a doctor. But some back problems are very serious. Do not ignore symptoms that need to be checked right away.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

How can you care for yourself at home?

- Sit or lie in positions that are most comfortable and that reduce your pain. Try one of these positions when you lie down:
 - Lie on your back with your knees bent and supported by pillows.
 - Lie on the floor with your legs on the seat of a sofa or chair.
 - Lie on your side with your knees and hips bent and a pillow between your legs.
 - Lie on your stomach if it does not make pain worse.
- Do not sit up in bed, and avoid soft couches and twisted positions. Bed rest can help relieve pain at first, but it delays healing. Avoid bed rest after the first day.
- Change positions every 30 minutes. If you must sit for long periods of time, take breaks from sitting. Get up and walk around, or lie flat.

- Try using a heating pad on a low or medium setting, for 15 to 20 minutes every 2 or 3 hours. Try a warm shower in place of one session with the heating pad. You can also buy single-use heat wraps that last up to 8 hours. You can also try ice or cold packs on your back for 10 to 20 minutes at a time, several times a day. (Put a thin cloth between the ice pack and your skin.)
- Take pain medicines exactly as directed.
 - If the doctor gave you a prescription medicine for pain, take it as prescribed.
 - If you are not taking a prescription pain medicine, ask your doctor if you can take an over-the-counter medicine.

When should you call for help?



Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You are unable to move a leg at all.
- You have back pain with severe belly pain.
- You have symptoms of a heart attack. These may include:
 - Chest pain or pressure, or a strange feeling in the chest.
 - Sweating.
 - Shortness of breath.
 - Nausea or vomiting.
 - Pain, pressure, or a strange feeling in the back, neck, jaw, or upper belly or in one or both shoulders or arms.
 - Lightheadedness or sudden weakness.
 - A fast or irregular heartbeat.

After you call **911**, the operator may tell you to chew 1 adult-strength or 2 to 4 low-dose aspirin. Wait for an ambulance. Do not try to drive yourself.

Call your doctor now or seek immediate medical care if:

- You have new or worse symptoms in your arms, legs, chest, belly, or buttocks. Symptoms may include:
 - Numbness or tingling.
 - Weakness.
 - Pain.
- You lose bladder or bowel control.
- You have back pain and:
 - Your pain is severe after injuring your back during a fall or accident.
 - You have had a back injury before that needed treatment.
 - Your pain has lasted longer than 4 weeks.
 - You have had weight loss you cannot explain.
 - You have a fever.
 - You have cancer now or have had it before.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if you are not getting better as expected.

Where can you learn more?

Go to <https://www.healthwise.net/PatientEd>

Enter **S904** in the search box to learn more about "**Back Pain, Emergency or Urgent Symptoms: Care Instructions**".

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