

# Learning About Relief for Back Pain



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## What is back pain?

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Most back pain is in the low back, below the ribs. In most cases, there isn't a clear cause of the pain, and this can be frustrating. But sometimes pain can be related to things in the back, such as the bones and joints, the discs between the bones, or the ligaments and muscles.

Although it may hurt a lot, back pain often gets better on its own in several weeks. Using good home treatment may help you feel better sooner.

## What can you do first to relieve back pain?

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When you first feel back pain, try these steps:

- **Walk.** Take short walks several times a day. You can start with 5 to 10 minutes 3 or 4 times a day and work up to longer walks. Walk on level surfaces and avoid hills and stairs until your back is better.
- **Relax.** Find a comfortable position for rest. Some people are comfortable on the floor or a medium-firm bed with a pillow under their head and another under their knees. Some people prefer to lie on their side with a pillow between their knees. Don't stay in one position for too long and avoid bed rest after the first day of back pain.
- **Try heat or ice.** 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 using the heating pad once a day. Or you can buy single-use heat wraps that last up to 8 hours. You can also try an ice pack for 10 to 15 minutes every 2 to 3 hours. You can use an ice pack or a bag of frozen vegetables wrapped in a thin towel. There is not strong evidence that either heat or ice will help, but you can try them to see if they help. You may also want to try switching between heat and cold.
- **Take pain medicine 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.

## What else can you do?

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- **Stretch and exercise.** Exercises that increase flexibility may relieve your pain and make it easier for your muscles to keep your spine in a good, neutral position. And don't forget to keep walking.
- **Do self-massage.** You can use self-massage to unwind after work or school or to energize yourself in the morning. You can easily massage your feet, hands, or neck. Self-massage works best if you are in comfortable clothes and are sitting or lying in a comfortable position. Use oil or lotion to massage bare skin.
- **Reduce stress.** Back pain can lead to a vicious circle: Distress about the pain tenses the muscles in your back, which in turn causes more pain. Learn how to relax your mind and your muscles to lower your stress.

### Where can you learn more?

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

Enter **Q517** in the search box to learn more about **"Learning About Relief for Back Pain"**.

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