

Back Pain: Care Instructions



Overview

In most cases, there isn't a clear cause for back pain. It may be related to problems with muscles and ligaments of the back. It may also be related to problems with the nerves, discs, or bones of the back. Moving, lifting, standing, sitting, or sleeping in an awkward way can strain the back. Arthritis is another cause of back pain.

Although it may hurt a lot, back pain usually improves on its own within several weeks. Most people recover in 12 weeks or less. Using self-care, such as ice or heat and light activity (like walking) may help you feel better sooner.

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 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 of back pain.
- 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 in a comfortable position.

- 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 try an ice pack for 10 to 15 minutes every 2 to 3 hours. 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.
- 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.
- Return to work and other activities as soon as you can. Continued rest without activity is usually not good for your back.
- To prevent future back pain, do exercises to stretch and strengthen your back and stomach. Learn how to use good posture, safe lifting techniques, and proper body mechanics.

When should you call for help?



Call your doctor now or seek immediate medical care if:

- You have new or worsening numbness in your legs.
- You have new or worsening weakness in your legs. (This could make it hard to stand up.)
- You lose control of your bladder or bowels.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if:

- You have a fever, lose weight, or don't feel well.
- You do not get better as expected.

Where can you learn more?

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

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