

BACK INJURY:

When You Should See a Doctor

Even with all the precautions in the world, injuries happen. If you're suffering from back pain and have the following symptoms, see a doctor. They could be signs of a serious injury.

- Your symptoms don't clear up in a few days, or get worse.
- Pain keeps you from doing normal daily activities.
- You can't control your bowels or bladder.
- You feel numb in the groin or rectal area.
- You have numbness or weakness in one or both legs.

Although back pain is a common problem, most bouts of backache go away within a week to 10 days. If you have minor back pain, try to keep up your daily activities as pain allows and even exercise gently. Research has shown that moderate activity does a world of good for the aching back and is better than bed rest for putting you on the road to recovery.

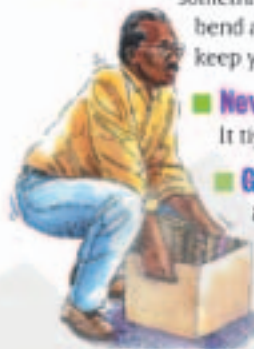
Remember: The better care you take of your back, the faster you'll bounce back to health.

Self-Care for the Pain

- Don't wait to take a nonprescription pain reliever such as ibuprofen, aspirin or acetaminophen if needed. **Reason:** These medicines work faster and better if taken when pain begins rather than at its peak.
- Seek relief by using an ice pack for the first few days, and then switch to heat. **How they help:** Cold reduces initial pain and swelling; a heating pad, hot bath or shower relaxes muscles.
- Be careful how you get out of bed. **Best:** Turn to your side, and then let your legs slowly drop to the floor as you push your body up with your arms.

More Back Pain Prevention Tips

- **Don't** sit or stand in one position for too long.
- **Adjust** your car seat forward so your knees are bent when pressing the pedals. Use a hard cushion or rolled towel to support your lower back.
- **Whenever** you bend down — even to pick up something as light as a piece of paper — bend at your knees, not your waist, and keep your back straight.



- **Never** bounce when stretching. It tightens back muscles.
- **Go** for back-friendly workouts. **Examples:** Brisk walking, swimming and low-impact aerobics, plus exercises that strengthen back, stomach and leg muscles. Always take 10 minutes to warm up to minimize risks to your back.

- **Don't** smoke. A smoker's cough may hurt the back by putting pressure on the disks that cushion the vertebrae.
- **If** you have to sit at a desk all day or behind the wheel of a car or truck for long hours, break up the time with stops for gentle stretching.
- **Wear** flat shoes or shoes with low heels.
- **Relax** more, to ease stress that can tense your back muscles.
- **Try** to sleep on your side with your knees bent. If you sleep on your back, place a small pillow under your knees. Avoid sleeping on your stomach.

Protecting Your Back



Back Basics

- Your back is supported by the spine, which is made up of 33 bones. These bones, called vertebrae, are stacked on top of each other and separated by soft discs that act as shock absorbers.
- Holding the vertebrae together and keeping the spine upright are tough ligaments (ropelike fibers) and strong back muscles.
- Back pain occurs most often around the lower or lumbar part of the spine. It usually results from overstretching the muscles and ligaments of the back. Irritation of the tiny joints between the vertebrae is another cause. Only about 1 in 20 back pain attacks are related to “slipped” or ruptured discs.

7 Steps to a Healthier Back

Taking care of your back will keep annoying and sometimes debilitating aches away. Keep these back basics in mind.

LISTEN to your body. If your back hurts, stop what you’re doing. Change position often if you must sit or stand for long periods of time.

PREVENT falls. Many back injuries result from slips, trips and falls. Make sure loose carpeting is tacked down, stairways are well lit and walking areas are free of electrical cords, toys and other hazards.

PERFECT your posture. Your back works harder when you slouch. Always sit or stand straight with your shoulders back.

WATCH your weight. Excess weight, along with being bad for your general health, puts extra stress and strain on your back.

MANAGE stress. Anxiety and stress tighten the muscles in your back,

making them less flexible and more injury prone. Practicing stress management and relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, stretching and visualization can help your back (and the rest of you!) relax.

EXERCISE regularly. Strong back and stomach muscles help protect against back injury. Before each workout, warm up with gentle stretches. Then concentrate on exercising the large muscles of your lower back and abdomen.

GIVE your back a good rest. Lie flat on your back with a pillow tucked under your knees, or rest on your side with your knees bent. Use a firm mattress and avoid sleeping on your stomach.



Learn to Lift Safely

Four out of five adults experience lower back pain at some point. One major cause is lifting incorrectly. If you lift objects at work, light or heavy, a few adjustments in your posture and method can protect your body from injury. Here’s how to do it right:

- Think before you lift. Never lift anything heavier than you can manage alone.
- Bend your knees, not your waist. Go down as low as you can by bending at your knees while keeping your back straight.
- Hold the load as close to your body as you can. Tighten your stomach muscles and get ready to lift.
- Lift with your legs. Straighten up slowly, using the strong muscles of your hips and legs. Balance the weight of your load between both hands or shoulders.
- Move carefully. Keep your back straight and don’t turn it sideways while carrying. And remember to unload slowly.
- Never bend over at the waist to lift an object, no matter how light it is — you could strain your back. Don’t take objects down from shelves that are too high to reach. Use a sturdy stepladder and keep the object close to your body. Let your arms and legs do the work.

More lifting tips: Always turn to face the object you are about to lift ... lift and unload slowly ... ask for help lifting heavy objects ... use tools and lifting machines when possible.

Posture Check

You probably think you know how to sit and stand. After all, you do both every day. But both these activities can tire, and even injure, your back muscles. A few times a day, check your posture. Here’s how:

- ✓ Note the three curves of your spine — your neck (cervical curve), middle back (thoracic curve) and lower back (lumbar curve). Make sure your back is not arched back or slouched forward.
- ✓ Are you sitting or standing up straight with your ears, shoulders and hips in line?
- ✓ If you’re sitting, minimize stress on your spine by keeping your knees slightly higher than your hips (use a footrest or stool if necessary). A small pillow can add lower back support. And be sure to stretch during breaks.
- ✓ If you’re standing for long periods, try resting one foot on a small stool. You’ll reduce your risk of back strain.