

Low Back Pain: Brief Version

What is low back pain? How does it happen?

Low back pain is pain or stiffness in the lower back. Most of the time, it is caused when a muscle in your back is strained. For example, it can happen when you lift a heavy object or when you sit or stand for a long time. Health problems, such as arthritis, can also cause back pain.

Low back pain may last a day or two, several weeks, or longer. You may have pain in one spot or it may spread down the buttocks and into your legs.

You should see your healthcare provider right away if you have back pain with these symptoms:

- You cannot control your bladder or bowels.
- You have a hard time moving your legs or walking.
- Your legs are numb or tingling.

These symptoms may mean you have hurt the nerves in your lower back.

When you see your healthcare provider, he or she will:

- Ask about your symptoms.
- Give you an exam.

X-rays or other tests may also be done.

How is it treated?

Here are some good ideas for taking care of low back pain:

- Use an ice pack wrapped in a towel for 20 minutes, 1 to 4 times a day. (Don't leave it on too long. You could get frostbite. Set an alarm to remind you.)
- Use an electric heating pad on a low setting (or a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel) for 20 to 30 minutes. (Don't let the heating pad get too hot, and don't fall asleep with it. You could get a burn.)
- Take aspirin, ibuprofen, or other pain medicines your healthcare provider may suggest.
- Ask about exercises you can do to stretch and strengthen your back muscles.

When you sleep or lie down, keep these hints in mind:

- Rest on a firm mattress. It may help to lie on your back with your knees raised or lie on your side with your knees bent.
- Put a pillow under your knees when you are lying down.
- Sleep without a pillow under your head.

Talk to your healthcare provider about whether it would help to:

- Wear a belt or corset to support your back.
- Make visits to a physical therapist for traction.
- Have your back massaged by a trained person.

Take it easy at first. As you start to feel better, you'll be able to do more and more. But be careful. You may need to cut back on what you do:

- If your symptoms come back.
- If you have more pain after you start doing more or something new.

See your healthcare provider if your pain is worse even with treatment.

How can I take care of myself?

You can lower the strain on your back. Here are some ideas that can help:

- Try to get to and keep a healthy weight.
- Use good posture. Stand with your head up, shoulders straight, chest forward, your weight on both feet, and your pelvis tucked in.
- Sit in a straight-backed chair and hold your spine against the back of the chair.
- Sit close to the pedals when you drive. Use your seat belt and a hard backrest or pillow.
- Use a footrest for one foot when you stand or sit in one spot for a long time. This keeps your back straight.
- Bend your knees when you bend over.

Here are tips when you need to lift or move heavy objects:

- Don't push with your arms when you move a heavy object. Turn around and push backwards so your legs take the strain.
- Bend your knees and hips and keep your back straight when you lift a heavy object.
- Don't lift heavy objects higher than your waist.
- Hold packages you carry close to your body, with your arms bent.

To rest your back, do these exercises for 5 minutes or longer:

- Lie on your back, bend your knees, and put pillows under your knees.
- Lie on your back, put a pillow under your neck, bend your knees to a 90-degree angle, and put your lower legs and feet on a chair.
- Lie on your back, bend your knees, and bring one knee up to your chest and hold it there. Repeat with the other knee, then bring both knees to your chest. When holding your knee to your chest, grab your thigh rather than your lower leg.

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