

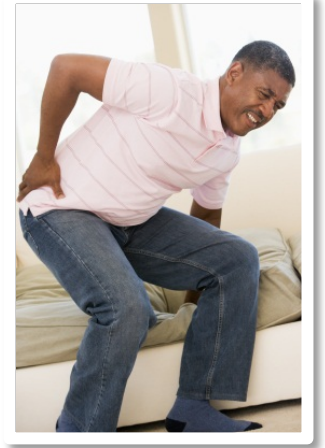
## Back Pain: Your guide to prevention and relief

Back pain is a common condition that will be experienced by most people at some point during their lifetime. Luckily, back pain is usually not serious. Though it may hurt a lot, it typically improves quickly, and most people will see significant improvement in two to four weeks.

### How to use this guide:

Your back pain guide is split into 5 chapters. Depending on the type of back pain you have, you may have different options for prevention, treatment and recovery. Read the entire guide, or skip to the chapter that applies to you.

- Chapter 1: First-Time Pain      “I’ve never had back pain before.”
- Chapter 2: Repeat Pain        “I feel good most of the time, but the pain keeps coming back.”
- Chapter 3: Persistent Pain    “I live with pain all the time.”
- Chapter 4: Prevention
- Chapter 5: Exercise Examples

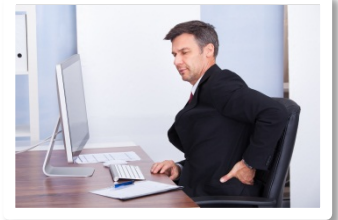


### Myths and Facts

Back pain is very common, but there are many myths about the causes and treatment of back pain.

- **Myth:** Back pain is usually disabling.  
**Fact:** Back pain can be intense, but it is rarely serious or disabling. In fact, 7 out of 10 people typically get better in 2 weeks. Nine out of 10 typically get better in 4 to 6 weeks with or without treatment.
- **Myth:** Rest – and not working – is the best medicine for back pain.  
**Fact:** Early movement and return to all your usual activities, including work, usually helps speed up healing. It also helps prevent deconditioning (loss of strength).
- **Myth:** Slipped disks require surgery to repair.  
**Fact:** Surgery is rarely needed to repair even herniated disks. Most get better on their own or with spine therapy.

- **Myth:** You need narcotics for back pain.  
**Fact:** Your doctor may recommend over-the-counter medicines. Narcotics are rarely used and can actually make the pain worse. They also cause drowsiness and constipation and have a risk of addiction.
- **Myth:** MRIs and CT scans can identify the source of pain.  
**Fact:** There are many pain-producing tissues in the back, including muscles, ligaments, tendons, joints and disks. Most of the time we can't identify the exact cause of the pain. Even sophisticated tests like MRIs and CT scans aren't of much help. In fact, MRIs are often abnormal in people who don't have any back pain at all.
- **Myth:** Most back pain is caused by injury or heavy lifting.  
**Fact:** People who have jobs where they sit all day are just as likely to have back pain as those who do very physical job.



There are some rare cases where back pain can be a sign of a serious medical problem. If you have any of these symptoms, call your doctor right away:

- Unexpected weight loss
- Pain that makes it hard to move or get comfortable or keeps you up all night
- Pain that doesn't seem to get better after two or three weeks
- Nausea/vomiting, stomachache, weakness, sweating, or a fever
- Difficulty controlling your bladder or bowel
- Leg weakness that gets worse
- Numbness and tingling in the upper part of your legs
- Pain that travels down the lower part of your legs
- Redness or swelling on your back or spine

# Chapter 1: First Time Pain

Is this the first time that you've had back pain? You'll be happy to know that most back pain doesn't require treatment. It usually gets better little by little and goes away completely within six weeks. During that time it's best to stay active. Consider some of the options outlined below to help provide back pain relief. As always, if you have any of the symptoms listed on page 2, call your doctor right away.

## Self-care

Recent studies show that bed rest is not needed for most back problems. In fact, staying in bed can worsen symptoms and delay recovery. What is helpful is moderate, steadily increasing activity that doesn't make your pain much worse.

Getting back to work or your usual activities in a few days or less will help you recover quickly. You can expect some discomfort, but being active will prevent your back from becoming weak. Get back to all your usual activities as soon as you can. **Remember that just because it hurts, it isn't harming you.** Activity is the key to getting better. Being active, such as by walking, helps you recover sooner.



Additionally, some people find ice and/or heat to be helpful, so you might want to experiment to see what works best for you.

## Exercise

Exercise and activity are keys to recovery. They can help prevent back problems from returning. To stay active, keep yourself in the best physical condition you can. Back pain can recur, so plan to improve your fitness now.



Start walking every day as soon as you can. Add other activities to your routine, such as swimming and biking. They may also provide good motion to the painful areas. Exercise consistently. Remember that it's ok to work hard at this in spite of some discomfort.

If you have become deconditioned (lost strength in your back), you may need personalized, intensive back exercises to regain strength and function. A physical therapist or chiropractor can help you with exercises to increase your range of motion and make you more comfortable as you start to recover. He or she can make suggestions about how to move your body. You'll learn about bending, lifting, how to improve daily activity, and how to build your spinal and overall fitness.

## Posture and movement

Good posture and proper sleeping position helps keep the body aligned and reduces stress on back muscles and joints. The way you move can be linked to the risk of developing back pain. Normal, everyday movements like sitting, lifting, carrying, bending, and twisting all affect your lower back. To minimize risk, it's important to focus on moving safely—at home, at work, everywhere. Here are some tips that can help:

- **Change positions frequently.** Anytime your body has to stay in one position, your body is under continuous strain. Sitting or standing for long periods of time can be stressful for your body, and especially your back.

- Stretch it out: Stretch frequently to break up the strain cycle.
- Avoid prolonged bending.
- **Sit smart.**
  - When sitting, use a chair with enough lower back support.
  - Put a pillow behind your back to reduce the stress of sitting.
  - Limit how much time you sit.
- **Sleep smart.**
  - Choose sleeping positions that reduce stress on your back.
  - Place a pillow under your knees when lying on your back, or between your legs when lying on your side.
- **Work safer.**
  - Don't get trapped in a workstation—at work or at home—that does not fit your body type. Minimal adjustments to your workspace can be the key to back pain prevention.
  - Keep it elbow height: Usually, the ideal work surface height is about elbow height. This keeps you from having to lean, reach, or bend to get your work done.
  - When carrying things, keep loads close to the body.
  - Move it within your reach: Don't twist, turn, or strain in order to pick up or lift something. Keep items you frequently use within easy reach. Instead of twisting to grab something, move your entire body until you are facing the item.



## Medicine

In many cases, despite pain and discomfort, you will heal better if you do not use medicines. When needed, acetaminophen (Tylenol®) can ease back pain. Anti-inflammatory medicines can also be helpful. These include ibuprofen (Motrin® or Advil®), naproxen (Aleve®) and aspirin. You can get these medicines without a prescription.

Other medicines are rarely needed. Their side effects and risks are often worse than just waiting to get better by staying active and exercising. Narcotics can make the back pain better today. However, they can lead to prolonged difficulties or even worse pain in the future if taken over time. Contact your doctor if your pain is not improving.

## Chapter 2: Repeat Pain

If your back pain keeps returning, it may be time to consider making some minor changes to your day-to-day routine. Repeat pain can often be improved by taking some extra steps to care for your back. Consider making a few changes outlined below to help provide back pain relief. As always, if you have any of the symptoms listed on page 2, call your doctor right away.

### Self-care

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Getting back to work or your usual activities in a few days or less will help you recover quickly. You can expect some discomfort, but being active will prevent your back from becoming weak. Get back to all your usual activities as soon as you can. **Remember that just because it hurts, it isn't harming you.** Activity is the key to getting better. Being active, such as by walking, helps you recover sooner.

Additionally, some people find ice and/or heat to be helpful, so you might want to experiment to see what works best for you.

### Exercise



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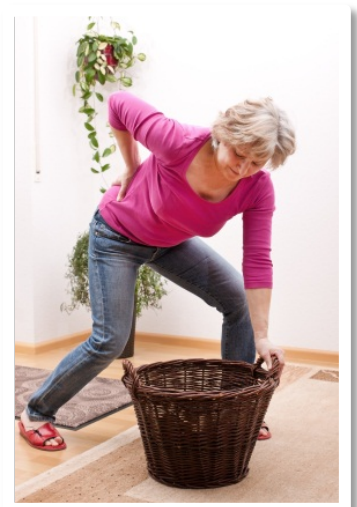
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### Posture and movement

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- **Change positions frequently.** Anytime your body has to stay in one position, your body is under continuous strain. Sitting or standing for long periods of time can be stressful for your body, and especially your back.
  - Stretch it out: Stretch frequently to break up the strain cycle.
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### Stress management

Back pain can get worse from stress and worrying about your finances, family or job because your body is under a heightened state of tension. Learning to manage everyday stress can help you recover. Take time to relax. If stress continues to be a problem, talk with your doctor or therapist.

### Medicine

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### Imaging/ x-ray

You probably don't need an x-ray, MRI, or CT scan. There are many pain-producing tissues in the back, including muscles, ligaments, tendons, joints and disks. Most of the time we can't identify the exact cause of the pain. Even sophisticated tests like MRIs and CT scans aren't of much help. In fact, MRIs are often abnormal in people who don't have any back pain at all.

If your doctor thinks your pain is due to an accident or other medical conditions, he or she may order an imaging test. Imaging should not be recommended (including CT, MRI, and x-ray) if your pain isn't due to an accident or other medical conditions.



# Chapter 3: Persistent Pain

Everyday back pain should get better and go away entirely within about six weeks. If it doesn't, or if it gets worse, you should talk with a doctor. There are many ways to treat persistent pain, depending on your specific condition and preferences. Some options are outlined below. Work with your doctor to find what's right for you. As always, if you have any of the symptoms listed on page 2, call your doctor right away.

## Physical therapy

The latest research tells us that progressive physical therapy is often the most effective

treatment for patients who are not getting better on their own. This kind of treatment builds muscle strength. This approach should be tried before thinking about invasive and potentially harmful procedures that may not help.

Major surgeries such as spinal fusion and disc replacement have much greater risks and complications. Exercise and time often work better. After years of research, we now know that lifestyle changes and self-management of back pain can be the best treatment of all.

Many physical therapy practices have experienced great success in reducing back-pain and have patients that are thrilled with the results.

If you are interested in physical therapy, talk to your doctor about referring you to a back-pain focused physical therapy practice in your area.

## Exercise

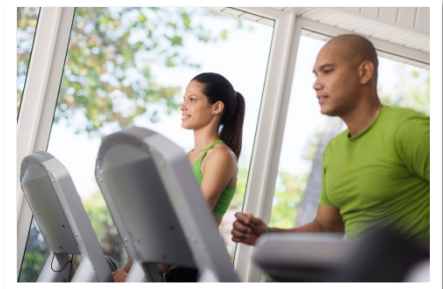
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## Stress management

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## Medicine

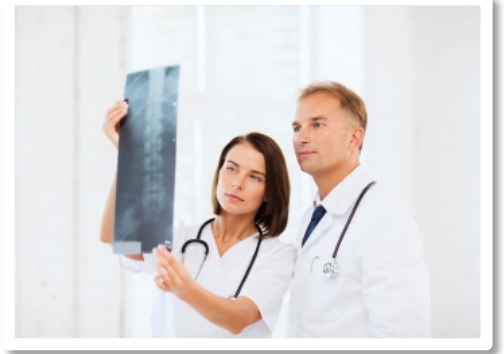
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If your doctor thinks your pain is due to an accident or other medical conditions, he or she may order an imaging test. Imaging should not be recommended (including CT, MRI, and x-ray) for if your pain isn't caused by an accident or other medical conditions.



## Surgery

The latest research tells us that progressive physical therapy is often the most effective treatment for patients who are not getting better on their own. This approach should be tried before thinking about invasive and potentially harmful procedures that may not help.

Surgery is rarely needed for back pain. It is more effective for severe, radiating leg pain that does not improve with time. It may also be needed for weakness that gets worse. Sometimes it is needed when there is severe pain in the back or leg that lasts for weeks despite exercise. If you do need surgery, your doctor will consult with a spine expert.

If you have health insurance through HealthPartners, your provider will refer you to a Medical Spine Center **BEFORE** you see a surgeon.



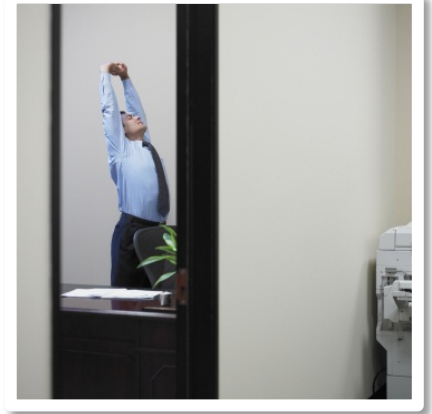
# Chapter 4: Prevention

Approximately two-thirds of the people who recover from a first episode of acute low back symptoms will have another episode within 12 months. Unless the back symptoms are very different from the first episode or the patient has a new medical condition, you can expect improvement to be similar for each episode. This makes prevention important for people that have experienced back pain in the past, and for those that want to avoid back pain completely.

## Posture and movement

Good posture and proper sleeping position helps keep the body aligned and reduces stress on back muscles and joints. The way you move can be linked to the risk of developing back pain. Normal, everyday movements like sitting, lifting, carrying, bending, and twisting all affect your lower back. To minimize risk, it's important to focus on moving safely—at home, at work, everywhere. Here are some tips that can help:

- **Change positions frequently.** Anytime your body has to stay in one position, your body is under continuous strain. Sitting or standing for long periods of time can be stressful for your body, and especially your back.
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  - Avoid prolonged bending.
- **Sit smart.**
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  - Place a pillow under your knees when lying on your back, or between your legs when lying on your side.
- **Work safer.**
  - Don't get trapped in a workstation—at work or at home—that does not fit your body type. Minimal adjustments to your workspace can be the key to back pain prevention.
  - Keep it elbow height: Usually, the ideal work surface height is about elbow height. This keeps you from having to lean, reach, or bend to get your work done.
  - When carrying things, keep loads close to the body.
  - Move it within your reach: Don't twist, turn, or strain in order to pick up or lift something. Keep items you frequently use within easy reach. Instead of twisting to grab something, move your entire body until you are facing the item.
- **Lift safer.** Plan it before you move it: Have a plan before you move or pick up anything heavy, bulky, in an awkward position, or out of the ordinary. Ask yourself:
  - What is the object? Be aware of the object's weight before just diving in to pick it up.
  - How to lift/move the object? Keep it in the safe zone. Lift/move the object from a location between your knee height and armpit height. Keep it as close as possible to your body to reduce risk of injury even more.
  - If the object is too heavy, ask for assistance. Or, use a lifting device if available. Better to ask for help than to hurt yourself.



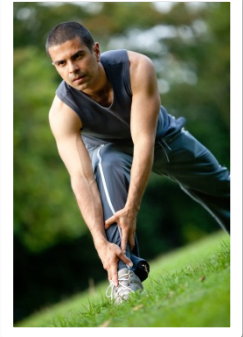
**Who can improve the lifting and moving process?** You can. Strengthen your muscles and be smart. A physical therapist can make suggestions for you about body mechanics (how to move your body). You'll learn about bending, lifting, how to improve your activities of daily living and build your spinal and overall fitness.

### Stress Management

Back pain can get worse from stress and worrying about your finances, family or job because your body is under a heightened state of tension. Learning to manage everyday stress can help your recovery. Take time to relax. Talk with your doctor or therapist if stress is a problem.

### Exercise

To stay active, keep yourself in the best physical condition you can. Aim to walk every day. Other activities, such as swimming and biking, can also be beneficial. Mix up your routine and make sure you enjoy the activities you choose, but make sure to exercise consistently. Include lots of exercises that keep your back, abdominal muscles, and legs strong. These will especially help in your recovery and prevent future back problems.



Remember that it's ok to work hard even if you feel some discomfort. *Hurt* is not the same as *harm*. Of course, listen to your body. Don't do exercises that greatly increase your pain.

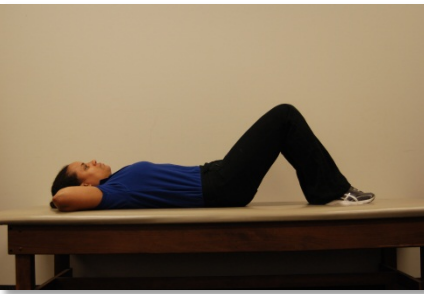
If you have become deconditioned (lost strength in your back), you may need personalized, intensive back exercises to regain strength and function. A physical therapist or chiropractor can help you with this. They can also help you get started right with the back exercises shown below.

## Chapter 5: Exercise Examples

Exercise is so important, and the exercises in this section can especially help prevent or treat acute low back pain. Physical therapists and chiropractors can help you get started right with the back exercises shown below. These can make you more comfortable and able to move more easily as you start to recover.

The following exercises can prevent back pain, help you recover from back pain, or keep back pain from coming back. Remember, hurt is not the same as harm. Do tell your doctor or therapist if any exercise is especially painful or makes your pain much worse.

### Pelvic Tilt



Lie flat on your back, knees bent, feet flat on the floor, body relaxed. Tighten the abdominal muscles. Don't stop breathing! Tilt your pelvis so the small of your back feels like it is pressed into the floor. Hold 10 seconds, then relax. Continue to breathe.

Repeat 10 times, 3-4 times each day.

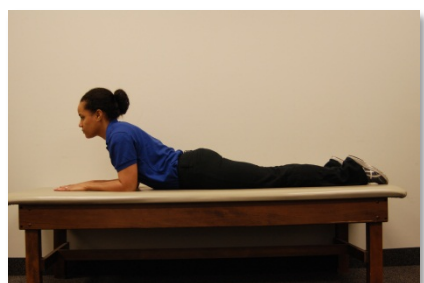
### Knee Raise



Lie flat on your back, knees bent. Bring one leg slowly to your chest as shown. Hug your knee gently, then return to the start position. Repeat the exercise with other leg. Remember to breathe throughout the exercise.

Repeat 5 times with each leg, 3-4 times each day.

### Partial Press-up



Lie face down on a firm surface. Allow your body to relax completely. Now raise your upper body and rest on your elbows. Let your lower back relax toward the floor. Relax your legs as much as you can. Hold this position for 5-10 seconds while continuing to breathe. Return to the starting position.

Repeat 5 to 10 times, 3-4 times each day.