

Back Pain

Our 'back' is a complex system of vertebrae, discs, joints, muscles, tendons, ligaments and nerves. Back pain is a warning sign that some part of this system is injured or not working properly. Some cases of back pain settle with simple treatment, while others need more specialised care.

Symptoms

Muscle and ligament strains are the most common cause of back pain, and the neck and lower back are the most common sites of pain.

Back pain can be a sharp pain, an ache or a spasm and may be felt in the middle of the back or on one side. Sometimes pain can also be felt in one or both legs. The pain may be associated with stiffness, making it hard to turn or bend in a certain direction.

Causes

Things that can put people more at risk of injuring back muscles and ligaments include:

- Older age
- Poor posture

- Weak muscles (e.g., due to lack of exercise)
- Heavy lifting and bending
- Sitting for long periods, especially in poorly designed work areas
- Poor mobility or staying in one position for long periods
- Being overweight
- Emotional stress (can increase tension in back muscles)
- Pregnancy (hormones loosen joints of the lower spine in preparation for childbirth).

Other causes of back pain include arthritis, sciatica, disc degeneration, vertebral fracture and infection.

Treatment

The treatment for back pain depends on the cause. A doctor can help find the cause and advise on the best treatment. It is rare for back pain to be caused by a serious medical problem and most cases get better in a few weeks.

- For most kinds of back pain, it is best to get back to normal activities of daily living as soon as possible. Prolonged bed rest can be harmful. Avoid activities and situations that make back pain worse.
- Heat or cold packs applied to the painful area may bring relief.
- Adopt comfortable positions. Try sleeping on a firm mattress with two pillows under your knees. Keep your back flat.
- Back pain may be relieved by stretching, exercise, massage or manipulation. Ask a physiotherapist or other health care practitioner with expertise in back care.
- After recovery, an exercise program for back and abdominal muscles can help prevent re-injury – ask a health care practitioner with expertise in back care.
- Surgery can help some types of back pain (e.g., sciatica or a damaged disc).

Medicines

- Simple pain relieving medicines and anti-inflammatory medicines, gels and creams can be recommended by a pharmacist.
- Stronger pain relieving medicines can be prescribed by a doctor.
- Medicines that relax back muscles can be prescribed by a doctor
- An injection of corticosteroid or local anaesthetic into a joint or nerve area can sometimes relieve severe back pain.

Self care

To relieve and prevent back pain consider how you are using your back and always try to keep your back straight. Sit, walk and stand with a balanced, relaxed posture. Learn exercises to improve posture and mobility – ask a health care practitioner with expertise in back care.

When standing or moving

- For good posture, stand tall, rest shoulders down and back, tighten your stomach, tuck your bottom in and soften your knees.
- To lift a load, bend at the hips and knees, with feet apart. Hold load close to your body, tighten your stomach muscles and lift by using your legs, keeping your back straight. To turn, move your feet, do not twist your spine. Get some help or use equipment if the load is too heavy for one person to manage.

Different people need different lifting techniques. Ask a physiotherapist about safe lifting techniques.

- Squat or kneel to reach down low.
- Wear low-heeled shoes with arch supports and cushioned heels.
- Use short strokes when sweeping or vacuuming. Bend your knees and move your feet.
- Stop any activity that causes pain or leg numbness or tingling.

When sitting and lying

- Have your bed mattress on a firm base and use a low pillow.
- Choose seats that support the lower back and thighs along their whole length. Sit right back with feet flat on the ground or on a footrest.
- Use a lumbar roll for lower back support if needed.
- Position your workstation and computer for good posture.

Stay healthy

- Keep to a healthy body weight.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on most or preferably all days of the week.
- Learn and practice regular strengthening and flexibility exercises – ask a health care practitioner with expertise in back care.
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to reduce muscle tension.

Important

Consult a doctor if back pain:

- Lasts longer than a few weeks, is severe or recurring
- Develops gradually and slowly gets worse over days or weeks
- Is not eased by lying down or resting
- Is associated with a fall or injury
- Makes you completely immobile
- Needs continual pain relieving medicine for more than a few days
- Develops and you have osteoporosis or take a corticosteroid medicine
- Is associated with other symptoms (e.g., tingling or numbness, joint pain and swelling, leg weakness, bowel or bladder problems, fever, weight loss).

Avoid

- Bending forward and twisting, especially when lifting or pulling.
- Staying in the same position for long periods, especially sitting. If driving for a long time, take regular breaks to stand, stretch and walk.
- Sudden, forceful movements.
- Coughing or sneezing with your back bent over or twisted.
- Sleeping on your stomach.
- Carrying unbalanced or one-sided loads.
- Depending on pain relieving medicine to relieve persistent pain.

For more information

Australian Rheumatology Association

Website: www.rheumatology.org.au

Arthritis Australia

Phone: 1800 011 04

Website: www.arthritisaustralia.com.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Manage Pain

Website: www.managepain.com.au

National Health and Medical Research Council

Website: www.nhmrc.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts.

Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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» *Pain Relievers*

» *Relaxation Techniques*

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