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McKesson Clinical Reference Products: Women's Health Advisor 9.0
Illustration

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 (sciatica).

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

- You cannot control your bladder or bowels.
- You see blood in your urine or stools
- You feel lightheaded, short of breath or have chest pain
- You have a hard time moving your legs or walking.
- Your arms or legs are numb or tingling.

These symptoms may mean you have hurt your spine and nerves or have a more serious cause for your symptoms.

When you see your health care provider, he or she will:

- Ask about your symptoms, how and when the pain started and whether you have a personal or family history of back pain.
- Give you an exam.

X-rays or other tests may also be done, but many times these are not necessary.

How is it treated?

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

- An ice pack is useful in the first 24 hours especially if the back pain started after a clear-cut injury (lifting a heavy box or while playing a sport)
- After the first 24 hours, you can begin to use an electric heating pad on a low setting (or a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel) for 20 to 30 minutes at a time. (Don't let the heating pad get too hot, and don't fall asleep with it. You could get a burn.)
- Take medications for pain as your health care provider may suggest.
- Ask about exercises you can do to stretch and strengthen your back and stomach muscles. Try to avoid complete bed rest. This may lead to more stiffness and pain. It is better to keep yourself engaged with light activity, but obviously heavy activity is out of the question.

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.

Talk to your health care provider about whether it would help to:

- Wear a belt or corset to support your back.
- Make visits to a physical therapist.
- 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 health care provider if your pain is getting worse even with treatment.

Keep in mind, however, that it may take up to several weeks before you are completely pain free, so have patience about the healing process.

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.
- Always 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.
- Hold packages you carry close to your body, with your arms bent.

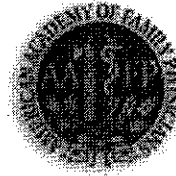
To rest your back, do these exercises for 5 minutes or longer:

- 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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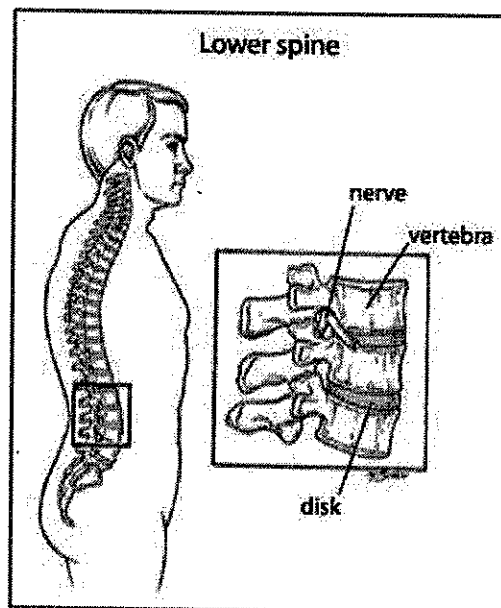
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Low Back Pain: Tips on Pain Relief and Prevention

What can cause low back injuries?

Many things can cause low back injuries—muscle strain or spasm, sprains of ligaments (which attach bone to bone), joint problems or a "slipped disk." The most common cause is using your back muscles in activities you're not used to, like lifting heavy furniture or doing yard work.

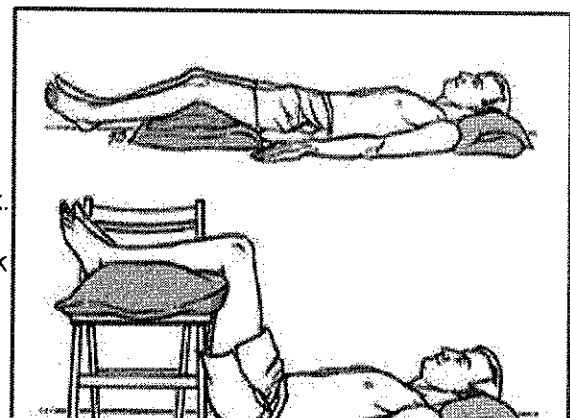
A slipped disk (also called a herniated disk) happens when a disk between the bones of the spine bulges and presses on nerves. This is often caused by twisting while lifting. But many people won't know what caused their slipped disk. In most cases, slipped disks and other back pain can be relieved by following a few simple methods.



What can I do for relief when I've hurt my lower back?

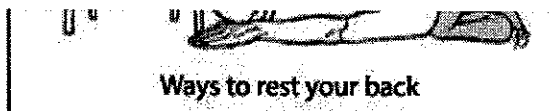
The best position for relief when your back hurts is to lie on your back on the floor with pillows under your knees, with your hips and knees bent and your feet on a chair, or just with your hips and knees bent. This takes the pressure and weight off your back.

You may need 1 to 2 days of this sort of rest for a hurt back. Resting longer than this can cause your muscles to weaken, which can slow your recovery. Even if it hurts, walk around for a few minutes every hour.



What else can I do for relief?

Heating pads can help to relax painful muscle spasms. Use heat for 20 to 30 minutes at a time. Ice packs and massages may also give relief.



Nonprescription medicines that reduce pain or swelling include aspirin, acetaminophen (brand name: Tylenol), naproxen (brand name: Aleve), ketoprofen (brand name: Orudis), and ibuprofen (brand name: Motrin).

Call your family doctor if:

- Pain goes down your leg below your knee
- Your leg, foot, groin or rectal area feels numb
- You have fever, nausea or vomiting, stomachache, weakness or sweating
- You lose control over going to the bathroom
- Your pain was caused by an injury
- Your pain is so intense you can't move around
- Your pain doesn't seem to be getting better after 2 to 3 weeks

Is there relief for ongoing back problems?

Treatment of ongoing back problems must be directed at the cause. This may mean losing weight (because being overweight can make back pain worse), getting your muscles in better shape, and improving your posture when you're sitting, standing and sleeping.

Tips for preventing back strain

- Don't lift by bending over. Lift an object by bending your knees and squatting to pick up the object. Keep your back straight and hold the object close to your body. Avoid twisting your body while lifting.
- Push rather than pull when you must move heavy objects.
- If you must sit at your desk or at the wheel of a car or truck for long hours, break up the time with stops to stretch.
- Wear flat shoes or shoes with low heels (1 inch or lower).
- Exercise regularly. An inactive lifestyle contributes to lower back pain.

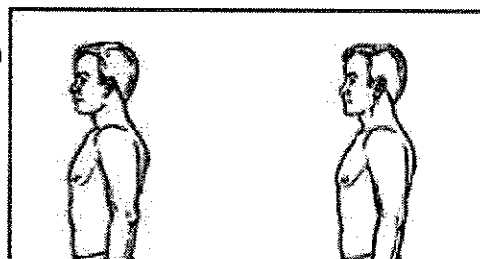
What's the best way to sit?

Sit in chairs with straight backs or low-back support. Keep your knees a little higher than your hips. Adjust the seat or use a low stool to prop your feet on. Turn by moving your whole body rather than by twisting at your waist.

When driving, sit straight and move the seat forward. This helps you not lean forward to reach the controls. You may want to put a small pillow or rolled towel behind your lower back if you must drive or sit for a long time.

What's the best position for standing?

If you must stand for long periods, rest 1 foot on a low stool to relieve pressure on your lower back. Every 5 to 15 minutes, switch the foot you're resting on the stool. Maintain good posture: Keep your ears, shoulders and hips in a straight line, with your head up and your stomach pulled in.

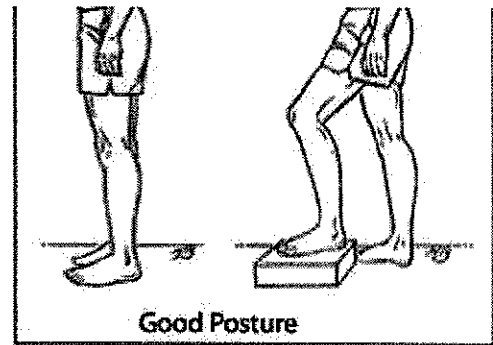


What's the best position for sleeping?

The best way to sleep is on your side with your knees bent. You may put a pillow under your head to support your neck. You may also put a pillow between your knees.

If you sleep on your back, put pillows under your knees and a small pillow under your lower back. Don't sleep on your stomach unless you put a pillow under your hips.

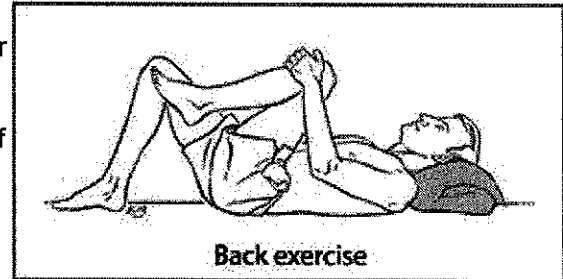
Use a firm mattress. If your mattress is too soft, use a board of 1/2-inch plywood under the mattress to add support.



What exercises can I do to strengthen my back?

Some specific exercises can help your back. One is to gently stretch your back muscles. Lie on your back with your knees bent and slowly raise your left knee to your chest. Press your lower back against the floor. Hold for 5 seconds. Relax and repeat the exercise with your right knee. Do 10 of these exercises for each leg, switching legs.

While some exercises are specific for your back, it's also important to stay active in general. Swimming and walking are good exercises to improve your overall fitness.



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This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

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