

LIVING WITH BACK PAIN

Health Information Basics for You and Your Family



National Institute of
Arthritis and Musculoskeletal
and Skin Diseases

For Your Information

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**National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin
Diseases (NIAMS) Information Clearinghouse**

National Institutes of Health

1 AMS Circle

Bethesda, MD 20892-3675

You can find this publication on the NIAMS website at

<https://www.niams.nih.gov>

Contents

What Is Back Pain?	1
Who Gets Back Pain?	2
When Should I See a Doctor?	3
How Do Doctors Treat Back Pain?	4
How to Help Keep Your Back Healthy.....	6
Research Supported by NIH/NIAMS.....	8
Clinical Trials: You Could Make a Difference!	9
Where Can I Find More Information About Back Pain?	10

Tear-out Tools

Back Pain Symptom Tracker	15
Daily Activity Tracker	16
What Questions Should I Ask My Doctor About My Back Pain?	17
Medication Tracker	18

What Is Back Pain?

Back pain is one of the most common medical problems in the United States. Changes to any part of your back—such as ones that may occur with aging, getting hurt, or having other medical conditions—can lead to back pain. It can start suddenly or come on slowly. It may feel like a dull, constant ache, or a sudden, sharp pain.

Acute back pain happens suddenly and usually lasts a few days to a few weeks. Back pain that lasts longer than 12 weeks is called chronic back pain.



Who Gets Back Pain?

Anyone can have back pain. You may be more likely to have back pain because of the following:

- **Age:** Back pain is more common as you age.
- **Fitness level:** Back pain is more common if you are out of shape. Weak back and abdominal muscles may result in back pain. You may also get back pain if you exercise too hard or too much.
- **Obesity:** If you are overweight or obese, it can put stress on the back and cause pain.
- **Family history:** Genes can play a role in some disorders that cause back pain.



- **Some jobs:** If your job requires you to lift, push, or pull while twisting your spine, you may be more likely to develop back pain. If you work at a desk all day and have poor posture, you may also develop back pain.

When Should I See a Doctor?

Back pain usually goes away within a few weeks with home treatment and self-care. However, you should see a doctor if your pain does not improve or if you have any of the following with your back pain:

- Tingling or numbness.
- Severe pain that does not improve with treatment.
- Back pain from a fall or injury.
- Back pain with:
 - ◆ Trouble urinating.
 - ◆ Weakness, pain, or numbness in your legs.
 - ◆ Fever.
 - ◆ Unexplained weight loss.

Your doctor may use many tools to help figure out the cause of your back pain. This can include performing an exam and asking you about your family and medical history, your pain, and if anything makes your pain worse or better. Sometimes, your doctor may order testing, such as x-rays, other imaging tests, and blood tests.

See pages 15 through 18 for tools to help keep track of your medications and how your back pain changes over time.

How Do Doctors Treat Back Pain?

Your treatment may depend on why you have back pain and what kind of pain you have. Most acute back pain usually gets better after a few weeks of home treatment.

Your doctor may recommend the following to help manage your back pain.

- Use cold packs to help with pain and hot packs to increase blood flow and help you heal.
- Do not lay down all day. Instead, limit activities or exercise that cause pain or make it worse. Slowly increase your activity as you are able.
- Use over-the-counter and prescription pain relievers for severe pain as directed by your doctor **(see page 18 for a tear-out medication tracker)**.
- Get physical therapy to help strengthen muscles and improve your posture. Check with your doctor or physical therapist before starting any exercise routine.
- Practice healthy habits such as getting regular sleep, eating a healthy diet, and quitting smoking.

You may want to try other types of therapies or treatments, such as:

- Massage and adjustment of the spine and muscles by a professionally trained doctor or therapist.
- A device that sends mild electrical pulses to the nerves through pads that are placed on your skin.
- Acupuncture, which is a Chinese practice that uses thin needles to help relieve pain.

Doctors may consider surgery to treat your back pain if other treatments have not helped. However, surgery is not right for everyone, even if the pain persists. The type of surgery your doctor recommends depends on the cause of your pain and your medical history.





How to Help Keep Your Back Healthy

You can work with your doctor to help manage your back pain and keep your back healthy. Remember to follow your doctor's directions. These tips may help:

- Slowly add exercises back into your daily routine. Talk to your doctor about the types of exercises that are best for you.
- Ask your doctor if you should avoid certain activities or exercises.

- Wear comfortable shoes with a low heel.
- When driving long distances, stop regularly to stand up and walk around.
- When sitting for a long time, remember to get up, move around, and change your position frequently.
- Limit the amount you carry. Instead of carrying more items at once, make extra trips.
- Try to sleep on your side with a small pillow between your knees. If you sleep on your back, place a pillow under your knees. If possible, avoid sleeping on your stomach.



Research Supported by NIH/NIAMS

Scientists supported by the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), are working to find out more about back pain. Researchers are looking at these issues:

- Managing chronic low back pain.
- Improving treatments for back pain.
- Treating acute pain and preventing pain from becoming chronic.
- Understanding the many factors that can cause back pain.
- Preventing disability in people who have back pain.
- Learning more about disorders that cause back pain to help prevent the disease from advancing.

Clinical Trials: You Could Make a Difference!

A clinical trial is a type of research study that involves people who volunteer to take part in it. Most clinical trials test a new treatment for a health problem, like a new drug or diet. Clinical trials help doctors learn if a new treatment is better, the same, or worse than standard care. Other clinical trials test ways to prevent a disease or find it early.

Talk to your doctor about whether a clinical trial would be right for you. When you volunteer to take part in clinical research, you help doctors and researchers learn more about back pain.

Also, when you participate in a study, you may have the chance to receive the newest treatment and have additional care from the clinical trial staff.

To learn more about the basics of participating in a clinical trial, visit the website NIH Clinical Research Trials and You at <https://www.nih.gov/health-information/nih-clinical-research-trials-you>.

At that website you will find:

- Information on risks and potential benefits.
- Firsthand stories from clinical trial volunteers.
- Explanations from researchers.
- Instructions for finding a clinical trial at the NIH or somewhere else in the country.

To hear from people who have taken part in clinical studies led by NIAMS researchers, watch the videos at <https://www.niams.nih.gov/community-outreach-initiative/clinical-research>.

Where Can I Find More Information About Back Pain?

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS) Information Clearinghouse

National Institutes of Health

1 AMS Circle

Bethesda, MD 20892-3675

Phone: 301-495-4484

Toll free: 877-22-NIAMS (226-4267)

TTY: 301-565-2966

Fax: 301-718-6366

Email: NIAMSinfo@mail.nih.gov

Website: <https://www.niams.nih.gov>

For more information about back pain, visit <https://www.niams.nih.gov/health-topics/back-pain>

If you need more information about available resources in your language or another language, please visit our website or contact the NIAMS Information Clearinghouse.

Other Resources

U.S. Food and Drug Administration

Toll free: 888-INFO-FDA (888-463-6332)

Website: <https://www.fda.gov>

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

Website: <https://www.ahrq.gov>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Center for Health Statistics

Website: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs>

CDC, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

Website: <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh>

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health

Website: <https://nccih.nih.gov>

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

Website: <https://www.ninds.nih.gov>

American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons

Website: <https://www.aaos.org>

American Chiropractic Association

Website: <https://www.acatoday.org>

American College of Rheumatology

Website: <https://www.rheumatology.org>

American Osteopathic Association

Website: <https://www.osteopathic.org>

North American Spine Society

Website: <https://www.spine.org>

Arthritis Foundation

Website: <https://www.arthritis.org>

The mission of the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), a part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' National Institutes of Health (NIH), is to support research into the causes, treatment, and prevention of arthritis and musculoskeletal and skin diseases; the training of basic and clinical scientists to carry out this research; and the dissemination of information on research progress in these diseases. The NIAMS Information Clearinghouse is a public service sponsored by the NIAMS that provides health information and information sources. Additional information can be found on the NIAMS website at <https://www.niams.nih.gov>.

Back Pain Symptom Tracker

This symptom tracker can help you and your doctor understand more about your condition and health. Write down how you feel and any changes in your health. Share this information with your doctor at each appointment.

Pain Scale

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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No Pain Very Little Pain Some Pain Moderate Pain Severe Pain Unbearable Pain

Common back pain symptoms:

- Increasing pain with lifting and bending.
- Worsening pain when resting, sitting, or standing.
- Back pain that comes and goes.
- Stiffness in the morning when awakening and lessened back pain with activity.
- Pain that radiates away from the back into the buttocks, leg, or hip.

Symptom (describe what it is and where)	When did the symptom start?	Did the symptom go away? If so when?	Did anything help ease or relieve the pain?	How bad is the symptom or pain?
Low back and buttock pain	November 30	No	Rest and heat	5 (from pain scale)

Notes or Concerns:



Daily Activity Tracker

To help you manage your back pain, it's important for you to tell your doctor about your ability to do day-to-day tasks. Use this tool to monitor your daily activities. Share this information with your doctor at every appointment.

Below you will find a few examples. Fill in blank rows with similar activities that you do every day.

Activity	Easy to Do	Some Effort	Extra Effort	Difficult	Unable
Attend social events	November 1		November 22, 23		November 26
Bathe or shower					
Concentrate or focus					
Do chores around the house such as cleaning					
Get dressed					
Keep appointments					
Exercise					
Walk					
Run					



What Questions Should I Ask My Doctor About My Back Pain?

Use this worksheet as a guide to start a conversation about back pain with your doctor. By talking with your doctor, you can work together to help manage your symptoms and improve your quality of life.

Ask some of the questions below, and use the blank spaces to fill in your own questions.

Common Questions	Answers/Notes
Are there any new treatments that may help my symptoms?	
Should I see other types of health care providers to help manage my back pain?	
How often do I need to come to the doctor's office for regular checkups?	
Is there anything else I can do to make my symptoms better?	
Are there any exercises I should do to help my back pain?	
Should I avoid any activities or exercises?	



Medication Tracker

Keeping track of your medications helps you and your doctor keep you healthy.

Use this page to keep track of all your medications, including any over-the-counter medications or supplements. Take it with you to all of your doctor appointments.

Name of Medication	What's It For?	Doctor	Dose	When to Take It	How Often	Notes or Concerns About Medications





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