

Coping With Back Pain

Many individuals have an occasional backache, but when the pain becomes severe or you experience the pain more frequently you should consult a doctor.

POSSIBLE CAUSES OF BACK PAIN:

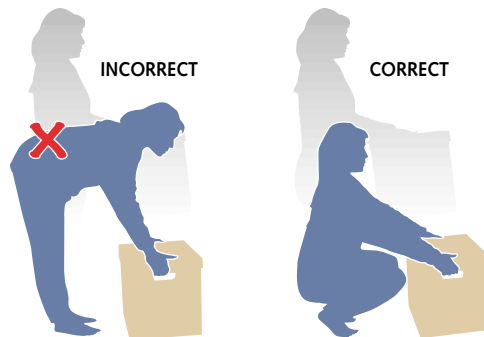
Some common causes of back pain are:

- Stretched or strained muscles in the back
- Injuries (such as from a fall) that cause trauma to muscles, bones, or other tissues in the back
- **Herniated** (or “slipped”) **disks** (this occurs when part of a disk that provides cushioning between 2 vertebrae—the bony structures that make up the backbone or spinal column—bulges out, which can cause pressure on surrounding tissue, such as nerves)
- **Osteoporosis** (decreased density of the bones)—can cause vertebrae to become fractured or compressed
- Being overweight
- Bad posture
- Being pregnant

Back pain can be a symptom of a number of other medical problems. Therefore, your doctor may ask you a number of questions about other symptoms you may be experiencing along with your back pain.

PROTECTING YOUR BACK WHEN LIFTING:

- Lift with leg muscles not back muscles; bend your knees (by squatting down to pick up object) not your waist or back
- Keep back straight (do not bend over) while lifting
- Keep the weight of what you are lifting close to your body
- Do not twist when lifting



An article in the December 6, 2000, issue of *JAMA* reports on a study of frequent use of a back belt (a belt designed to protect the back from possible injury when lifting) by workers who lift merchandise. The researchers did not find any benefits to using a back belt.

SELF-HELP IDEAS FOR EASING BACK PAIN:

- Short periods of rest lying flat on your back with your knees raised (by a pillow, for example); long periods of bed rest may weaken the muscles, adding to the problem and increasing the time to recover
- Limited rest combined with gentle exercise and lighter than normal activities
- Taking nonprescription pain relievers and/or anti-inflammatory medications following the manufacturer's instructions

Consult your doctor if the above strategies do not work for you. Your doctor may prescribe anti-inflammatory drugs, drugs that relax the muscles, and/or painkillers. Under severe conditions, back pain caused by structural problems with the backbone may require surgery.

PREVENTING BACK PAIN:

- Get regular exercise
- Stretch before exercise and other physical activities
- Do exercises to strengthen and make back muscles more flexible
- Do exercises to strengthen the abdominal muscles
- Always keep a good posture when standing and sitting
- Avoid standing or being in one position for too long a period of time
- Lose weight if you are overweight

WHEN TO SEE A DOCTOR:

If you experience:

- Severe pain that makes it difficult to move
- Fever and/or vomiting with the back pain
- Pain, numbness, or tingling in another part of your body
- Weakness in another part of your body
- Bowel problems or bladder problems, such as losing control of going to the bathroom
- Pain that lasts for more than 3 to 4 days

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
800/824-BONES or www.aaos.org
Send a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope to:
Low Back Pain
American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
P.O. Box 2058
Des Plaines, IL 60017
- American Academy of Family Physicians
Low Back Pain: Tips on Pain Relief and Prevention
800/274-2237, extension 5103
or familydoctor.org/healthfacts/117/index.html

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site (www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm). A *JAMA* Patient Page on low back pain was published June 19, 1998.

Additional Sources: National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, American Academy of Family Physicians, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, The AMA Home Medical Library, The AMA Family Medical Guide, The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine

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