

# ACHING BACK?

Get the facts about back pain.

Back pain is one of our most common medical problems in the United States<sup>1</sup> The level of back pain people experience varies. For some, it only lasts a few weeks without treatment. For others, the pain can be chronic and even prevent them from doing certain things.

Here's some helpful information to help you better understand back pain.

## The anatomy of your back

Your spine is made up of muscles, ligaments, discs and nerves designed to be very strong, but also very flexible. Most of your body's weight is supported by the back and spinal column.

**Spinal cord:** A thick cord of nerve tissue that comes off of the base of the brain and runs throughout the spinal column. Spinal nerves branch off the cord to various parts of the body.

**Vertebrae:** Bony building blocks of the spine, stacked on top of each other with discs in between each one.

**Muscles:** The muscles surrounding the spine help support it. They also help hold the body upright and allow the trunk of the body to move, twist and bend in many directions.

**Discs:** The shock absorbers between vertebrae that consist of two parts: A tough outer portion made of collagen and a soft inner core of a gel-like substance.

## Some of the possible causes for back pain<sup>1</sup>

- › Sprain to a ligament
- › Muscle or tendon strain
- › Overexertion, typically from strenuous exercise, lifting or movement
- › Back injuries from sports injuries, falls and accidents
- › Degenerative wear and tear on your discs from normal aging
- › A herniated or slipped disc
- › Broken bones
- › Osteoporosis
- › Arthritis
- › Kidney stones or infections
- › Tumors

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## Risk factors

Anyone can have back pain. Risk factors can include:<sup>1,2</sup>

**Fitness level:** Back pain is more common among people who are out of shape, or take on vigorous exercise when they are not physically fit.

**Obesity:** Being overweight or obese can put stress on the back and cause pain.

**Your job:** Jobs that require heavy lifting, pushing, pulling or twisting can injure the back. A desk job may cause pain if you slouch or sit all day in an uncomfortable chair.

**Age:** You may have more back pain as you get older.

**Family history:** Your genes play a role in some disorders that cause back pain.

**Cigarette smoking:** Smoking can increase your risk of back pain by blocking your body's ability to deliver nutrients to the discs in your back.

**Diseases:** Some types of arthritis and cancer can contribute to back pain.

**Improper lifting:** Using your back instead of your legs can lead to back pain.

## When to seek treatment

You should see a doctor if your pain does not get better after a few weeks, or if any of the following symptoms happen with your back pain.<sup>1</sup>

- Very bad back pain that does not get better with medication
- Back pain after a fall or injury
- Trouble urinating
- Weakness, pain, tingling or numbness in your legs
- Fever
- Weight loss that you did not intend

## Treatment

Before back pain can be treated, it needs to be determined if the pain is acute or chronic.

### Acute back pain<sup>3</sup>

Acute back pain usually gets better on its own and without treatment. While exercise is not usually advised, it's a good idea to continue with your usual daily activities as much as you can. Getting up and moving around can help ease stiffness and relieve pain. Over-the-counter pain relievers, such as ibuprofen might also help.

### Chronic back pain<sup>1</sup>

Here are some of the more commonly used, nonsurgical treatments your doctor might suggest to help relieve chronic back pain.

- Hot or cold packs (or a combination of the two)
- Exercise
- Physical therapy – can teach you about proper stretching and exercise
- Medications – over-the-counter and prescription
- Healthy behaviors, such as:
  - Proper movement, especially with heavy lifting, pushing or pulling
  - Relaxation
  - Regular sleep
  - Healthy eating
  - No smoking
  - Proper stretching and exercise – *always talk to your doctor before starting any exercise program*
- Injections – if medications and other nonsurgical treatments fail<sup>3</sup>
- Alternative treatments, such as yoga or acupuncture<sup>3</sup>



#### Sources:

1. National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases. "What is back pain?" <https://www.niams.nih.gov/health-topics/back-pain> (last reviewed July 2019).
2. Mayo Clinic. "Back pain: Overview." <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/back-pain/symptoms-causes/syc-20369906> (August 4, 2018).
3. Mayo Clinic. "Back pain: Diagnosis." <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/back-pain/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20369911> (August 4, 2018).

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