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Back Health

Care for Your **Aching Back**

- **Cold packs** help reduce swelling and numb pain, while **heat packs** can reduce muscle spasms and pain.
- If you think you've suffered **back strain**, apply cold treatment for 15 minutes, several times a day for 2 days. After 48 hours, a heating pad or warm bath may help.
- To **reduce swelling**, take an anti-inflammatory pain reliever such as ibuprofen or aspirin (unless your health care provider has advised against it).
- If you have **minor back pain**, try to keep up your daily activities as pain allows and even exercise gently. Research has shown that moderate activity helps an aching back and is better than bed rest for putting you on the road to recovery.
- If your back **pain is chronic**, lasting longer than 3 months, discuss your options with your provider.

Back Care at **Work**

Whether a full day's work means sitting in meetings, caring for patients or checking groceries, your back is at work, too — and subject to strain and injury. Lifting, repetitive movements, and awkward positions increase your risk of backache. Do you know how to protect your back? Do you follow basic ergonomic principles?

Review your daily habits:

- I avoid slouching when sitting or standing.
- I avoid leaning forward while working at my desk or standing at a workstation, such as a counter.
- I avoid bending over low objects.
- I use a lumbar cushion to support my lower back when I sit or drive for long periods.
- Before lifting, I test the weight by lifting a corner of the object.
- When lifting heavy objects, I bend my knees and power the lift with my leg muscles, not my back.
- When moving an object, I push rather than pull.
- I stretch every day to build strength and flexibility in my spine.
- I wear supportive, cushioned shoes when I stand for long periods on a hard surface.



More back support:

Lose excess belly fat. Added weight often causes lower backache.

Get up and go. Lack of activity is responsible for weak back muscles — use them or lose them. Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise (such as brisk walking) a week.

If you smoke, quit. Smokers are twice as likely to have back pain as nonsmokers. Smoking reduces the amount of oxygen-rich blood available for maintaining spinal health.



Assessment: Back Pain — Are You at Risk?

Back pain can be triggered by several factors, including habits, lifestyle and health conditions. Assess your risk:

1. Are you overweight or obese?

Yes (10) No (0)

2. For women: Are you pregnant?

Yes (10) No (0)

3. Do you smoke?

Yes (10) No (0)

4. Do you have poor posture?

Yes (10) No (0)

5. Have you had back injuries or back surgery?

Often (10) Sometimes (5) Rarely (0)

6. Are you generally sedentary (little or no regular exercise)?

Yes (10) No (0)

7. Do you often need to lift heavy objects?

Often (10) Sometimes (5) Rarely (0)

8. Do you feel depressed?

Often (10) Sometimes (5) Rarely (0)

9. Do you sit for long periods of time?

Often (10) Sometimes (5) Rarely (0)

10. How often do you feel stressed?

Often (10) Sometimes (5) Rarely (0)

How did you do?

100-60 high risk

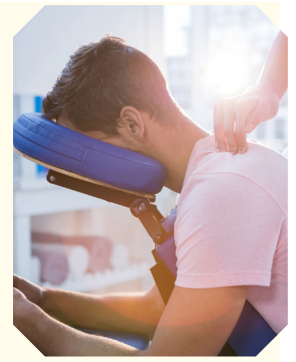
55-25 medium risk

20-0 low risk

This assessment is not intended to be nor should it be construed as a diagnosis. Use it as a starting point for discussing your back health with your health care provider.



What's Causing Your Backache?



Because the back bears most of your body weight, it's vulnerable to strain and injury. It's easy to hurt your back when you lift or overdo activities or sit too long, especially if the muscles supporting your back are weak

The primary risk factors include a sedentary lifestyle, arthritis, obesity and smoking. Back pain may directly result from standing or sitting for long periods, ongoing strenuous labor, twisting, overstretching or overlifting.

The sources of low back (lumbar) pain can be the spinal discs between the vertebrae, the ligaments around the spine and the spinal cord and nerves, and the lower back muscles.

Sooner or later we all are subject to back pain. Chronic lower back pain, lasting more than 12 weeks, is the leading cause of disability. Fortunately, we're learning more about how to prevent and treat it.

In 2017, the American College of Physicians published their clinical practice guidelines for treating chronic low back pain (not due to damaged spinal nerves). They emphasize replacing prescription drug therapy with physical and mindfulness-based therapies, including:

- Physical therapy.
- Muscle-strengthening exercise.
- Acupuncture.
- Stress reduction.
- Meditation, tai chi and yoga.
- Progressive muscle relaxation and biofeedback.

The interventions listed above have been shown to help patients shift their focus from pain and disability to being more functional despite residual pain. With practice, patients have found that mindfulness treatments such as meditation can produce a non-narcotic, pain-free effect.

To help reduce your everyday backache:

- Maintain good posture, especially while sitting.
- Sit less. Get up and move about frequently.
- Do low-impact cardio exercise to improve circulation and strength.
- Strengthen your core muscles.
- Lose excess weight, especially abdominal fat.
- Let your strong leg muscles power the effort of lifting or climbing.

Most doctors now encourage back pain sufferers to stay active and routinely move their backs and related muscles to ease everyday tension and pain — provided it's the right kind of movement. Ask your health care provider to recommend a suitable workout for you — and your back.