

Back pain

What you need to know



Each year, almost 25% of adults in the U.S. suffer from some type of low-back pain. Most people have significant back pain at least once in their lives, though the cause is usually unknown. The level of back pain people experience varies. For some, it only lasts a few weeks, regardless of treatment. For others, the pain can be chronic and even debilitating.

Here's some helpful information to help you better understand your anatomy and why you might be experiencing back pain.

What's going on back there?

Your spine is an intricate network 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.

Defining your back

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, as well as 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.

What causes back pain?

- Poor posture and alignment
- Overexertion, typically from strenuous exercise, lifting or movement
- Traumatic back injuries from sports, falls and accidents
- Degenerative wear and tear from normal aging
- A bulging (slipped) or herniated (ruptured) disc
- Structural abnormalities like scoliosis
- Stress

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What can I do to treat my back pain?

Before treatment can be advised for your back pain, it needs to be determined if the pain you're experiencing is acute or chronic.

Acute back pain

Acute back pain usually gets better on its own and without treatment, although acetaminophen, aspirin, or ibuprofen can certainly be helpful. While you should avoid exercise or surgery, it's a good idea to continue with your usual daily activities since moving around can help ease stiffness and relieve pain. Proper stretching is often beneficial.

Chronic back pain

When it comes to treating chronic back pain, usually nonsurgical treatments are recommended.

Here are some of the more commonly used, nonsurgical treatments your doctor might suggest for chronic back pain:

Hot or cold: Hot or cold packs (or sometimes a combination of the two) can be soothing to chronically sore, stiff backs.

Exercise: Though not usually advisable for acute back pain, proper exercise can help ease chronic pain and keep it from returning. Always talk to your doctor before starting any exercise program. A short course of physical therapy may be indicated to provide instruction for proper stretching and exercise.

Medications: A wide range of medications (over-the-counter and prescription) are used to treat chronic back pain.

Behavioral modification: Developing a healthy attitude and learning to move your body properly while you go about your day, particularly those involving heavy lifting, pushing, or pulling, is sometimes part of the treatment plan for people with back pain. Other behavior changes include adopting healthy habits, such as exercise, relaxation, and regular sleep; and dropping bad habits, such as smoking and eating poorly.



Injections: When medications and other nonsurgical treatments fail to relieve chronic back pain, doctors may recommend injections for pain relief.

Complementary and alternative treatments: When back pain becomes chronic or when medications and other conventional therapies don't relieve it, some people try alternative treatments, such as yoga or acupuncture to help manage and relieve their pain.

For more information on ways to get and stay healthy, visit myCigna.com

Source: niams.nih.gov/Health_Info/Back_Pain/default.asp



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