What is Back Pain?

Back pain can range from a dull, constant ache to a sudden, sharp pain that makes it hard to move.

**Acute or short-term pain** starts quickly and lasts less than 6 weeks. It is the most common type of back pain. Acute pain can start quickly if you fall or lift something too heavy.

**Chronic or long-term pain** lasts for more than 3 months, and is much less common than acute pain.

Anyone can have back pain and about 80% of adults feel low back pain at some point in their lives.

### What causes the symptoms of back pain?

- **Tense muscles or spasms** are the most common causes of back pain. This kind of back pain almost always goes away with time and gentle activity like stretching and walking.
- **Injuries** from sprains, fractures, accidents, and falls can cause back pain.
- **Stress and depression** can increase likeliness of pain becoming chronic, or long-lasting.

### Some things that increase your risk are:

- **Getting older.** Back pain is more common as you get older. You may first have back pain when you are 30 to 40 years old.
- **Poor physical fitness.** Back pain is more common in people who don’t exercise regularly.
- **Being overweight.** A diet high in calories and fat can make you gain weight. Too much weight can stress the back and cause pain.
- **Heredity.** Some causes of back pain can run in your family, such as certain types of inflammatory arthritis.
- **Your job.** If you have to lift, push, or pull while twisting your spine, you may get back pain. If you work at a desk all day and do not sit up straight, you may also get back pain.
- **Smoking.** Your body may not be able to get enough nutrients to the disks in your back if you smoke. Smoker’s cough may also cause back pain. People who smoke are slow to heal, so back pain may last longer.
Treating Back Pain

Treatment for back pain depends on what kind of pain you have. Talk to your health care provider to learn what is best for you.

Exercise

You may want to do nothing else but rest, but for most people the best thing is to keep moving and do normal activities at your own pace. It is very important to reduce tension and increase flexibility in the low back and spine. Gentle exercises can encourage pelvic stretch and strengthening. They also help to bring movement to the low back and spine, and reduce tension.

Proper exercise can help ease chronic pain, but it may not help for acute back pain. Your health care provider or physical therapist can tell you the best types of exercise to do for your type of pain.

Medications

Some medications can also be helpful. The following are the main types of medications used for back pain:

- **Over-the-counter medicines** such as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs, like Advil) reduce both pain and swelling. Acetaminophen (like Tylenol) can also help relieve pain.

- **Topical pain medicines** are creams, ointments, and salves rubbed onto the skin over the site of pain. Many of these are over the counter and can be soothing.

- **Prescription Medications** like muscle relaxants, some antidepressants or sleep aids, or stronger anti-inflammatory medicines may be suggested by your health care provider for severe back pain.

Hot or Cold Packs (or Both)

Hot or cold packs can soothe sore, stiff backs. Heat reduces muscle spasms and pain. Cold helps reduce swelling and numbs deep pain. Using hot or cold packs may relieve pain, but this treatment does not fix the cause of chronic back pain.

Behavioral Changes

You can learn to lift, push, and pull in ways that cause less stress on your back. Changing how you exercise, relax, and sleep can help lessen back pain. Eating a healthy diet and not smoking also help.

Alternative Medical Treatments

When back pain becomes chronic or when other treatments do not relieve it, some people try alternative treatments. Ask your health care provider about these common treatments:

- **Manipulation.** Professionals, such as chiropractors, use their hands to adjust or massage the spine or nearby tissues.

- **Acupuncture.** This traditional Chinese practice uses thin needles to relieve pain and restore health. Acupuncture may be effective when used as a part of a comprehensive treatment plan for low back pain.

- **Massage therapy.** Soft tissue massage using hands or devices can be effective when used as a part of a treatment plan. Methods and techniques vary, and there are some low cost options available.

- **Stress reduction and holistic approaches.** Some therapists are able to give you tips and treatments for managing stress, which can help back pain.

For more information call Customer Service at **1(415) 547-7800** or visit [www.sfhp.org](http://www.sfhp.org)

Free 24/7 Nurse Help Line **1(877) 977-3397**
Preventing Back Pain

The best things you can do to prevent back pain are:

• **Exercise often** and keep your back and core muscles strong.

• **Walk often.** Walking keeps your stomach and back muscles healthy.

• **Lose weight** if you weigh too much. **Maintain a healthy weight** to reduce stress on the back which can cause pain.

• **Eat a healthy diet.** To have strong bones, you need to get enough calcium and vitamin D each day.

• **Change positions often** to prevent overuse conditions, especially if you sit all day at work or school.

When should I see my health care provider for my back pain?

You should see a health care provider as soon as possible if you also have:

• Numbness or tingling (especially in your legs)

• Severe pain that does not get better (or gets worse)

• Pain after a fall or an injury

• Trouble peeing

• Weakness

• Fever

• Weight loss when not on a diet

Sources:

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), [www.niams.nih.gov](http://www.niams.nih.gov)

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS), [www.ninds.nih.gov](http://www.ninds.nih.gov)

American Chronic Pain Association (ACPA), [www.theacpa.org](http://www.theacpa.org)