

Back Pain



Learn how back pain occurs, when it is serious, and how to treat it

Back pain is one of the most common health problems in the United States. Back pain can be in a specific spot or spread all over your back. It can feel like a dull, constant ache. Or it may be a sudden, sharp pain that makes it hard to move. About 90% of back pain cases are temporary, and most people make a full recovery within 12 weeks of symptoms starting.



Types of Back Pain

- **Acute (short-term) pain** can happen fast and may last a few days to a few weeks. You may feel acute pain if you fall or lift something too heavy.
- **Subacute back pain** can happen fast or over time. It may last 4 to 12 weeks.
- **Chronic (long-term) pain** lasts for more than 12 weeks and may occur daily or from time to time. Chronic back pain may be caused by changes in your spine as you get older, or other medical conditions.



How Does Back Pain Occur?

Anyone can have back pain. About 80% of adults feel back pain at some point in their lives. Some things that can increase your risk of getting back pain:

- **Fitness level.** Back pain is more common for people who do not exercise regularly. Weak back and stomach muscles may not support your spine (core strength). Also, you may get back pain if you work out too much after not being active for a while. Learn more about how to stay active the right amount with the **Moving More** fact sheet.

- **Weight gain.** If you carry extra weight, it can add stress on your bones and muscles.
- **Age.** Back pain is more common as you get older. You may start having back pain when you are 30 to 40 years old.
- **Family genes.** Some causes of back pain may run in your family, such as certain types of inflammatory arthritis (when your immune system attacks healthy tissue and can cause pain or swelling).
- **Your job.** If you must lift, push, or pull while twisting your spine at work, you may get back pain. If you work at a desk all day and do not sit up straight or stand often, you may also get back pain.
- **Stress.** If you often have poor sleep, depression, or anxiety, back pain can happen more often.
- **Smoking.** Your body may not be able to get enough nutrients to the discs in your spine if you smoke. Smoker's cough can also cause back pain. Smoking can also make you slow to heal, so back pain may last longer. You can get smoking treatment such as Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) at no cost with Medi-Cal. Learn more about how to quit smoking with the **Quitting Smoking and Vaping** fact sheet.


For more information call Customer Service at **1(415) 547-7800** or visit **sfhp.org/health-ed**

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How to Treat Back Pain

Treating your back pain depends on what kind of pain you have. Talk with your primary care provider* (PCP) about what is best for you.

*Your primary care provider is the doctor, physician assistant, or nurse practitioner in charge of your health care.

Get Proper Exercise

Getting regular exercise can keep your back muscles strong. Try exercises such as:

- Tai chi
- Yoga
- Core training (such as sit-ups, planks, or lunges)
- Exercises with weights that practice balance



Gentle exercise and stretching can improve strength and reduce the tension of your entire back, pelvis, and hips. Talk with your PCP or physical therapist about the best types of exercise for your type of back pain. Learn more exercise tips with the **Moving More** fact sheet.



Use a Cold or Hot Pack (or Both)

Cold and hot packs can soothe sore, stiff backs. Cold packs help reduce swelling and numb deep pain. This is most helpful right when you get an injury and have acute pain. Hot packs reduce sharp pain and improve blood flow and healing. Hot packs are often used for long-term care after an injury.

Try Integrative Health Services

When back pain becomes chronic (long-term), some people try integrative treatments. Talk with your PCP if you are interested in getting integrative health services, such as acupuncture or chiropractic. There are many free or low-cost integrative health services you can get in your community. Learn more about what services you can get at no cost with



SFHP Medi-Cal at
SFHP Benefits and Covered Services.



Take Medicine

Some medicine can be helpful. The main types of medications used for back pain:

- **Over-the-counter medicines** such as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs, like Advil) that reduce pain and swelling. Acetaminophen (like Tylenol) can also help relieve pain.
- **Topical pain medicines** are creams, ointments, and salves that you can rub onto your skin where you feel the pain. You can get many of these over the counter.
- **Prescription medicines** may be muscle relaxants, some antidepressants or sleep aids, or stronger anti-inflammatory medications. These medications tend to be stronger and make a person sleepy. They are mostly reserved for people who have severe pain.

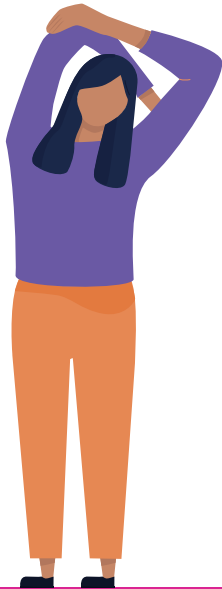
Please talk with your PCP to see which type of medicine is right for you.

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Prevent Back Pain



Some of the best ways to prevent back pain are to:

- **Exercise often** and keep your back and core muscles strong
- **Walk often.** Walking keeps your stomach and back muscles healthy.
- **Keep a healthy weight** to reduce stress on your back
- **Eat a healthy diet** full of vegetables, fruits, and low-fat protein. These types of foods have important nutrients like calcium and vitamin D that you need each day to stay healthy. Learn more with the **Eating Healthy** fact sheet.
- **Practice good posture** and avoid slouching. Try to remember to support your back when sitting or standing.
- **Avoid lifting heavy items** whenever possible. If you do lift a heavy item, use your leg and abdominal muscles (abs) instead of your back.



When Is Back Pain Serious?

You should see your PCP as soon as possible if you 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 trying to lose weight



Transportation

If you have pain and need help with transportation to your PCP visits, you can get a ride at no cost. Call SFHP Customer Service at **1(415) 547-7800** for more information.

Resources:



Common Causes of Back Pain –
Types & Treatment | NIAMS
nih.gov



Back Pain: Diagnosis, Treatment,
and Steps to Take | NIAMS
nih.gov



American Chronic
Pain Association
acpanow.com

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