

Low back pain

Low back pain is discomfort, tension or stiffness in the lower part of your back, usually around your lumbar spine, where your vertebrae curve inwards above your buttocks. This is the part of the back that is working when you bend, stoop or sit down. Low back pain is very common, with more than 80% of adults having some sort of back pain in their lifetime.

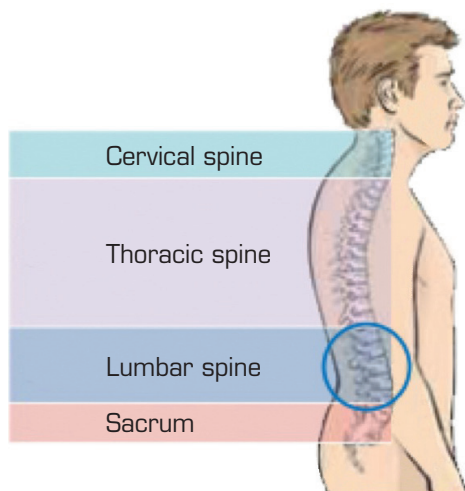


Figure taken from 'Knowing about your low back pain – ACC' pdf

What causes low back pain?

Sprains and strains in the muscles or ligaments that support the vertebrae in your lower back are a common cause of low back pain. Sprains are caused by overstretching or tearing ligaments, which connect bone to bone. Strains are tears in your tendons or muscle. Both can happen when twisting, bending, overstretching, or lifting something that is too heavy or awkwardly.

Low back pain can also occur as a result of degeneration of the discs that sit between your vertebrae associated with normal wear and tear that occurs as people get older. These discs provide height and allow you to bend and flex your back. As they deteriorate, they get thinner and more rigid and lose their cushioning ability. This restricts movement and causes pain.

There are many other causes of low back pain including herniated or ruptured discs; compressed, inflamed, or damaged spinal nerves; trauma (such as a car accident); spinal stenosis (a narrowing of the spinal column); and spinal irregularities, such as scoliosis.

Risk factors for low back pain

Most people experience their first attack of low back pain between the ages of 30 and 50, with attacks becoming more frequent with age.

Back pain is common among people who have poor posture or are physically unfit, especially 'weekend warriors'; people who sit at a desk all week and only exercise at weekends. Excess weight and pregnancy also put stress on the lower back.

Research has identified several genes linked to back pain, which means that some people are more likely to develop back pain than others. Back pain can also occur as a result of backpack overload in children or occupations that require heavy lifting, pushing, or pulling. Anxiety, depression, and stress can influence how a person focuses on their back pain and perceives its severity. Conditions such as arthritis, endometriosis, fibromyalgia, and osteoporosis predispose people to low back pain.

Could it be something serious?

If your pain is severe or came 'out of the blue', it is a good idea for your doctor to assess the possible cause. Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms and perform a thorough back examination. Occasionally, x-rays, blood tests, and other special tests may be required. Fortunately, most cases of back pain are not due to serious underlying conditions.

Rarely, infections, kidney stones, tumors, or other medical conditions may be causing your back pain. Always see your doctor if you have low back pain and a history of cancer; have used IV drugs or have been on steroids; have lost weight recently, or are under 20 or over 50 years. If your pain is worse when lying down or you have constant, severe pain especially at night, you should also see your doctor for assessment.

See your doctor urgently if you have:

- A fever, sweats, or chills
- Constant pain, especially at night, or worsening pain
- Difficulty controlling your bladder or bowels
- Difficulty walking
- Numbness across the bottom (anus) or between the legs (groin)
- Numbness, pins and needles or weakness in both legs
- Redness/swelling on your back
- Or you have had a major fall or accident.

Managing the pain

Low back pain can be very painful, but fortunately, most cases of low back pain resolve with little intervention, generally within four to six weeks. There are several things that you can do to help.

Pain medication

Simple pain relievers, such as paracetamol, may be taken to help manage the initial pain, which should settle down within a few days or weeks. Anti-inflammatories, such as ibuprofen, may also be useful; however, they are not suitable for everyone so check with your doctor or pharmacist that they are safe for you to take. Never exceed the recommended dose on the packet. Sometimes, other medication may be prescribed if your pain is severe or radiating down your leg.

Pain management tip: Rather than 'toughing it out', take painkillers regularly. If you can move around freely you are likely to make a quicker recovery. If you are still in a lot of pain, or the pain is getting worse, see your doctor.

Stay active

Staying active can shorten your recovery time, so you should resume normal daily activities (including a return to work with a restriction on certain activities such as lifting) as soon as possible and not stay in bed. Although moving about may hurt, this does not mean you are damaging your back. In fact, not using your back can make your pain worse. Ensure that you are getting enough pain relief to stay active without too much discomfort. Walking and swimming are excellent ways of staying active while managing low back pain.

The educational website www.habitatwork.co.nz has information and exercises to help you prevent and manage discomfort and pain at work.

Sleep well

It is important to get a good night's sleep. Take your pain medication an hour before going to bed and sleep on a firm mattress. Put a pillow under your knees if you sleep on your back, or between your knees if you sleep on your side.

Hot and cold packs

Hot or cold packs may ease pain and help with mobility. Hot packs can relax muscles and cold packs can be useful for the

inflammation following injury. Do not apply heat or cold directly to your skin – wrap in a thin towel first.

Physiotherapy

Physiotherapists can help identify actions or habits that may be contributing to your pain and provide stretching and strengthening exercises and advice to reduce pain and prevent further episodes. Treatment can involve massage to relax the muscles and mobilisation or manipulation of stiff joints. Acupuncture may also help.

Looking after your back

Low back pain often happens more than once, so it is important to try to prevent it from recurring.

Good posture and lifting technique

Poor posture places unnecessary strain on the back muscles and spine. When working at a computer, make sure your work surface is at a comfortable height and don't slouch. Sit in a chair with good lumbar support and take regular breaks. Don't lift heavy objects by yourself, get somebody else to help you. Bend your knees, pull your stomach muscles in and keep your head in line with your back.

Regular exercise

One of the best ways to achieve a healthy, resilient back is through regular exercise to build strong, flexible lower back and abdominal muscles that help support the spine and improve your posture. Start with walking, cycling or swimming, for 20–30 minutes each day. Before starting any exercises, it is best to consult a doctor or physiotherapist.

Reduce stress and stay positive

Stress can increase muscle tension and back pain, so finding ways to relieve it is important, such as walking, listening to music or having a warm bath. Most back pain is temporary but see your doctor if your pain is not improving after 4–6 weeks.

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