

Back Pain

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What is back pain?

Pain in your back can be an annoying ache, or it can get so bad that it's unbearable. Back pain is the second most common reason why people visit their healthcare providers (just after colds). Many people miss work because of it. Around 80% to 90% of people in the United States will have back pain at some point in their lives.

What are the types of back pain?

Back pain is categorized in a number of ways by medical professionals. You can describe your back pain by its location: upper, middle or lower back pain that's on the left side, center or right side. You may also define different types of pain to your healthcare provider. Is your pain mild, moderate or severe? Is the pain a broad ache or a smaller sharp stab? Also, back pain can be categorized by how long it lasts. An acute episode is one that is sudden and brief, and often related to an injury. Chronic/persistent means your back pain has lasted more than three to six months.

How common is back pain?

Back pain is very common. Daily, about 2% of the U.S. workforce is disabled by back pain, which is the most common reason cited for an inability to perform daily tasks.

Who is at risk for back pain?

The older you are, the more likely you are to experience back pain. You're also at a higher risk if you:

- Don't exercise.
- Already have some types of cancer or arthritis.
- Are overweight.
- Lift using your back instead of your legs.
- Have anxiety or depression.
- Smoke or use other tobacco products.

Symptoms and Causes

What causes back pain?

There are causes of local back pain (pain in your spine, muscles and other tissues in your back) and then there are causes of radiating back pain (pain from a problem in an organ that spreads to or feels like it's in your back). Examples of both include:

Local back pain

Back pain in your spine may be caused by:

- Ankylosing spondylitis.
- Arthritis.
- Degenerative spondylolisthesis.
- Intervertebral disk degeneration.
- Radiculopathy.
- Sacroiliac joint dysfunction.
- Spinal disk degeneration.
- Spinal stenosis.
- Spondylolisthesis.
- Trauma/injury.
- Tumor.

Back pain localized in your tissues may be caused by:

- Sprain of a ligament.
- A strain of a muscle. In the U.S. 85% of cases of back pain are caused by a muscle strain.
- Muscle tightness.

Radiating back pain

Radiating back pain may be caused by:

- Abdominal aortic aneurysms.
- Appendicitis.
- Cancers (very rare).
- Fibromyalgia and myofascial pain syndrome.
- Infections (very rare).
- Gallbladder inflammation.

- Kidney infection and kidney stones.
- Liver problems.
- Pancreatitis.
- Pelvic inflammatory diseases (sexually transmitted infections).
- Perforating stomach ulcers.
- Urinary tract infections.

In women or people assigned female at birth (AFAB), radiating back pain may be caused by:

- Endometriosis.
- Pregnancy.
- Uterine fibroids.

In men or people assigned male at birth (AMAB), radiating back pain may be caused by:

- Testicular injury or torsion.

How long does back pain last?

Back pain can last a day, a few weeks, months or a lifetime. The length of time depends on the cause and the treatment.

Is back pain a symptom of pregnancy?

It can be. Many people who are pregnant experience back pain.

Can back pain be a sign of cancer?

It's extremely rare – only about 1% of the time will back pain be a sign of cancer.

Diagnosis and Tests

How is back pain evaluated and diagnosed?

In many cases, your healthcare provider may get all the information they need from interviewing you about your symptoms, health history and lifestyle and then doing an exam. However, sometimes image tests are necessary. These may include:

- X-rays.
- MRI.
- CT scans.
- Bone scan.
- EMGs.

Which healthcare providers evaluate and diagnose back pain?

Your primary healthcare provider is often able to determine the cause and diagnose your back pain. If needed, they'll send you to a specialist and/or order tests. Possible specialists include:

- A physical therapist.
- An osteopath.
- A chiropractor.
- A medical spine provider who specializes in back pain.
- An orthopaedic provider who specializes in bones and joints.

Your healthcare provider may also recommend a therapist or psychiatrist if you're struggling to cope with your pain.

What questions might a healthcare provider ask to help diagnose back pain?

Your healthcare provider will ask if you injured yourself, how long you've had back pain and how severe your pain is. They need to know other medical problems you have and what medications you take. If you have family members who have had similar issues, let your provider know. They might also ask questions such as:

- Are you able to work every day?
- Does what you do for a living involve lifting?
- Do any of your hobbies aggravate your back pain?
- Do you have any other symptoms? (For example, if you have pain when you urinate in addition to your back pain then that may indicate a urinary tract infection.)
- Where is your pain located?
- How does the pain affect your daily activities?
- What at-home treatments have you tried? (ice packs, heat pads, etc.)

Management and Treatment

How long will I have back pain?

This depends on the cause of your back pain. If your pain is caused by an infection, for example, it might go away after the course of antibiotic is complete. If your pain is caused by spinal degeneration, you may need treatment through your lifetime.

How is back pain treated?

The cause of your back pain determines the treatment. For your back pain you may feel better with:

- Cold packs and/or heating pads.

- Stretching exercises.
- Massages.
- Surgery.
- Antibiotics.
- Cortisone.
- Traction.
- Physical therapy.
- Other over-the-counter and prescribed muscle relaxants, steroids and pain medications.
- Exercise — specifically strengthening exercises.
- Chiropractic care.
- Acupuncture.

What can I do to help relieve the symptoms of back pain?

If you had an acute injury, use a cold pack for 20 to 30 minutes at a time for the first 48 hours or so. After that (or if there was no acute injury), you may find it helps more to alternate a cold pack and a heating pad. Keep one on the area for 20 to 30 minutes, and then switch. Take over-the-counter pain medications like ibuprofen (Advil®) or acetaminophen (Tylenol®). Get plenty of rest and fluids.

If you see your provider, make sure you take all medications prescribed, get all of your testing done and attend all of your appointments.

How should I sleep with back pain?

It may feel most comfortable to sleep on your back with a pillow under your knees to relieve pressure on your back. If this isn't comfortable for you, try sleeping on your side with a pillow between your knees. Avoid sleeping on your stomach.

Prevention

What can I do to reduce my risk of back pain?

Possible ways to reduce your risk of back pain include:

- Learn to lift with your legs, not your back muscles.
- Exercise.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Don't slouch. Keep your back straight when you stand and sit.
- Stop smoking and using tobacco products.
- Get help for stress, anxiety and depression.

- Wear low-heeled shoes.
- Stretch regularly.

Outlook / Prognosis

Can back pain go away on its own?

Back pain may go away on its own in some cases, but it's best to get treatment, especially if you don't know the cause.

When can I get back to my normal activities?

Talk to your healthcare provider about a timeline regarding when you can get back to daily activities. You may need to take time off work to rest, or you may be able to go as long as you follow your providers' recommended treatments. Don't guess about when you'll be ready — confirm it with your provider.

Can back pain come back after it's treated?

Yes, muscles and bones can get sore again.

Living With

When should I see my healthcare provider?

See your healthcare provider about your back pain if it's severe or doesn't get better after a few weeks. See them immediately if:

- You feel weakness in your legs.
- You feel numbness or tingling in your legs, genitals, buttocks or anus.
- You're losing weight (not on purpose).
- There's swelling in your back.
- The pain spreads down one or both of your legs.

If your pain isn't any better after four to seven days of treatment, you should contact your healthcare provider again. See your provider again as soon as possible if you now have back pain plus:

- Blood or pus in your poop.
- Fever.
- Urine (pee) that is bloody or cloudy, if it smells bad or if peeing is painful.
- Groin pain.
- Vomiting.

- Nausea.
- Pain during or after sex.
- Irregular periods.
- Abdominal pain

What questions should I ask my healthcare provider about my back pain?

See your provider and get treatment soon so that you don't have to suffer from back pain. Some of the questions you may want to ask them include:

- What's causing my back pain?
- Is there a name for my type of back pain?
- Will my pain go away on its own?
- What's my best treatment option?
- What can I do at home to help treat my pain?
- Do I need to see a specialist?
- Can I work/go about my usual activities?
- How can I prevent the back pain from coming back?

When is back pain an emergency?

Call 911 or go to the emergency department if:

- The pain is sudden and severe.
- You have pain and you can't control your bowels or urine, or have nausea, fever or vomiting.
- Your pain is so severe that you can't go about your daily activities.

A note from Cleveland Clinic

Back pain can be very frustrating and interrupt your daily life. There are many treatment options to help your back pain and get back to daily activities. See your healthcare provider to discuss your options. They're there to help.

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Terms Linked In This Article:

- lower back pain (<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/7936-lower-back-pain>)
- Ankylosing spondylitis (<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/16595-ankylosing-spondylitis-as>)
- Spinal stenosis (<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/17499-spinal-stenosis>)
- Sprain of a ligament. (<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/10265-back-strains-and-sprains>)
- of a muscle. (<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/10265-back-strains-and-sprains>)
- Appendicitis (<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/8095-appendicitis>)
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- Nausea (<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/8106-nausea--vomiting>)

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