

# Low Back Pain



## What Is Low Back Pain?

Many people have pain and stiffness in their lower back at some time in their lives. Almost always, low back pain gets better within a few days or weeks without treatment. Sometimes it can come and go over months or years. The reason for the pain may not always be known, but it is rarely caused by a serious health condition. Back pain can be caused by:

- Muscle or ligament strain from heavy lifting or a sudden movement
- Bulging or rupturing of the disks that cushion the bones in your spine
- Narrowing of the open spaces in your spine, called spinal stenosis
- Osteoporosis, which can weaken bones in your spine and lead to fractures



## What Are the Warning Signs of Low Back Pain?

Most low back pain occurs suddenly and goes away after a short time without treatment. If you have any of the following symptoms, it may be something more serious. See a doctor if you have:

- Pain that runs down the leg below the knee
- No feeling (numbness) in the leg, foot, groin, or rectal area
- Loss of bowel or bladder control
- Fever, weakness, or sweating
- Pain that is so bad you cannot move around or that does not get better after 2 to 3 weeks
- Previous history of cancer
- Been using medicines that weaken bones or your immune system, like corticosteroids



## How Is Low Back Pain Diagnosed?

Sometimes, you and your doctor may not know what caused your back pain.

- To learn more, your doctor will ask you questions about your back pain and about your medical history.
- He or she will examine your back and try to find the cause of the pain.
- Imaging tests, like an x-ray or MRI, are rarely needed. These tests are expensive, may be harmful, and usually do not help your doctor find the cause of your low back pain. Talk with your doctor about the need for an imaging test for your back pain.

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## How Is Low Back Pain Treated?

- Avoid bed rest and try to keep active doing everyday activities, but do not lift heavy things.
- Massage, a heating pad, or hot shower can help to relieve pain.
- If these things do not help your pain, ask your doctor if you can try a non-prescription pain killer like acetaminophen or ibuprofen.
- Your doctor may suggest other treatments such as medicines to relax your muscles, stretching, or refer you to physical therapy if the pain does not go away.
- Talk with your doctor about alternative therapies such as chiropractic care, yoga, and acupuncture.
- Surgery is rarely needed.



## Questions for My Doctor

- What symptoms could mean I have a more serious condition?
- Are there activities I should avoid?
- What over-the-counter medicines should I take for my back pain?
- How can I prevent back pain in the future?
- Are there any exercises I can do to strengthen my back?
- Will an imaging test change the treatment for my back pain?
- When can I go back to work?
- Are there alternative therapies that may help my pain?



## Bottom Line

- Pain and stiffness in the lower back is a common problem. It usually gets better within a few days or weeks without the need for any testing or treatment.
- See your doctor if the pain does not go away after a few weeks or if you have such symptoms as fever, muscle weakness, numbness, loss of bladder or bowel control, or previous history of cancer.
- You will get better faster if you return to doing normal everyday activities as soon as possible.
- You doctor may suggest exercises that can prevent back pain from coming back. Over-the-counter medicines can help with pain.

## For More Information

- **Medline Plus:** <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/backpain.html>
- **ACP and Consumer Reports:** [www.acponline.org/clinical\\_information/high\\_value\\_care\\_lower\\_back.pdf](http://www.acponline.org/clinical_information/high_value_care_lower_back.pdf)

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