

Low back pain

Low back pain is discomfort, tension or stiffness in the 'small' of your back (lumbar spine), where the spine curves inwards above the 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.

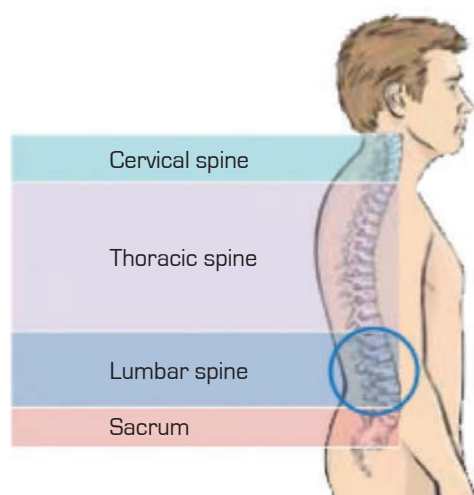


Figure taken from 'Knowing about your low back pain – ACC' pdf

What causes low back pain?

"Low back pain" can refer to different forms of spinal pain. The spinal pain may be lumbar, sacral or lumbosacral. Buttock (gluteal) pain and flank (loin pain) are commonly mistaken as lumbar/sacral spinal pain but may have separate causes.

A common cause of low back pain is a strain or sprain of the muscles or ligaments that support the joints in the lower back. Back sprains often result from over-stretching ligaments, which connect bone to bone. This can happen when twisting, bending or lifting awkwardly. You may recall a specific event that triggered your low back pain, but it can occur for no apparent reason or after ordinary activity.

Lifestyle factors

A number of lifestyle factors can increase your risk of developing low back pain, or aggravate the pain once you have it. These factors include poor posture and fitness, sitting for long periods without a break, incorrect lifting, and being overweight.

Could it be something serious?

Fortunately, most back pain is not a result of serious disease or injury. For most people, there is initially no need for x-rays as most low back pain is caused by problems with non-bony structures, which do not show up on x-ray. In rare cases, low back pain can be a sign of a more serious condition and x-rays, blood tests and other special tests may be required.

If your pain is severe or came 'out of the blue', it is a good idea for your doctor to assess the possible cause. It is also important to see your doctor if you have low back pain and a history of cancer, you have used IV drugs or have been on steroids, you have had weight loss 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 any:

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

Managing the pain

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

Pain medication

The initial pain should settle down within a few days or a few weeks and can be managed with simple pain relievers, such as paracetamol. You may also find an anti-inflammatory medication, such as ibuprofen, useful. Anti-inflammatories are not suitable for everyone so it is important to check with your doctor or pharmacist if they are safe for you to take. If you are aged over 45 you may be



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STRONGER FOR LONGER PAIN RELIEF*





*vs. Paracetamol & Paracetamol + Codeine in dental pain studies. 1. Mehlisch D et al. Clinical Therapeutics 2010;32(6):1033-49. 2. Daniels S et al. Pain 2011;152:632-42.
Always read the label. Use only as directed. Incorrect use could be harmful. Do not use if you have a stomach ulcer. If symptoms persist see your healthcare professional. Reckitt Benckiser, Auckland. TAPS DA1541JD

Patient information – Low back pain



prescribed a medication to protect your stomach while you are taking anti-inflammatories (eg, a proton-pump inhibitor). Always make sure you take the recommended dose on the packet. If you have severe pain or pain down your leg, your doctor may prescribe additional medication. Your doctor or pharmacist can advise you on the pain medication that would work best for you.

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 avoid bed rest and get back to your normal activities (including a return to work, possibly with modification of activities) as soon as possible. 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, sleep on a firm mattress and experiment with different sleeping positions. Try putting 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 packs and cold packs may also be used to relieve pain. 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 are able to assess your back, identify actions or habits that may be adding to your pain and provide you with exercises (eg, stretching and strengthening) and advice to reduce pain and prevent further episodes. Treatment can involve massage to relax the muscles and mobilisation or manipulation of stiff joints. Visit

Physiotherapy New Zealand [<http://physiotherapy.org.nz/your-health/how-physio-can-help/back-pain>] for more information on how a physiotherapist may be able to help.

Looking after your back

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

Good posture and lifting technique

Poor posture places unnecessary strain on the back muscles and spine, so maintaining good posture is essential to the health of your back. When working at a computer, you should keep your back well aligned, move forward from the hips rather than slouching from your back, and take regular breaks. Learn correct lifting and bending techniques, particularly if your job involves a lot of heavy lifting. Let your legs do most of the lifting by bending them, not your back.

Regular exercise

One of the best ways to achieve a healthy, resilient back is through regular exercise to build strong, flexible muscles that help support the spine and improve your posture. Gradually increase your fitness by doing aerobic exercise, such as walking, cycling or swimming, for 20–30 minutes each day. Also consider exercises specifically aimed at improving the strength and mobility of the spine and back. Before starting any exercises, it is best to consult a doctor or physiotherapist.

Reduce stress and stay positive

Find ways to manage stress, which can increase muscle tension and back pain. Do things that help you relax, such as walking, listening to music or having a warm bath. Remind yourself that most back pain is only temporary, and there's a lot you can do to help it go away and stop it coming back.

If your pain is not improving after 4–6 weeks, or you have any conditions listed in the Box previously, see your doctor.

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