

“Do I need to be seen today?”

Let's Talk About...

Acute Low Back Pain

Overview

Back pain is one of the most common reasons for people to visit their doctor or miss work. Most people will have back pain at some time in their lives and while it may be scary or uncomfortable, it is rarely serious. Back pain can come on suddenly or build slowly and usually improves gradually within a few weeks. 'Acute' means the pain has lasted six weeks or less. If it has lasted longer, it may be 'subacute' or 'chronic.' There are many measures you can take to prevent or relieve back pain, in most cases eliminating the need to seek medical treatment. *Please consider the following before booking an appointment.*

What are the signs & symptoms?

Signs and symptoms of back pain may include:

- Muscle ache
- Shooting, sharp, or burning pain in the back
- Muscle spasms and tightness in the low back, pelvis, and hips
- Pain that radiates down your leg
- Limited flexibility or range of motion of the back
- Pain that worsens after prolonged sitting or standing



What causes back pain?

The majority of back pain develops without a specific underlying condition. This means your doctor or nurse may not be able to identify the cause with tests or imaging. Most back pain is caused by a muscle or ligament strain in the back.

Should I get an imaging test, such as an X-ray or MRI?

Most people do not need an imaging test. In the majority of cases, back pain gradually improves with at-home treatment and self-care. People typically get better on their own within 4 weeks and don't benefit from an office visit. Your healthcare provider (doctor, nurse practitioner, physician assistant) will not order an imaging test before then unless there are signs of something unusual (see "When to Call the WCFHT" below).



What can I do to feel better?

- Continue with regular light activities (such as walking) and avoid bedrest. People with low back pain recover faster if they stay active. Patients can see a physiotherapist to discuss proper mechanics and rule out minor injuries. A referral from your doctor is not required.
- Heat and cold packs may help alleviate acute back pain
- If needed, take an NSAID* such as ibuprofen (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin) or naproxen (sample brand name: Aleve) for the pain.
 - *Note: Patients with an allergy to Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs), a history of kidney problems or stomach ulcers should not take NSAIDs for pain relief.

How can I avoid getting back pain?

You may be able to avoid back pain or prevent recurrence by staying active and practicing proper body mechanics. To keep your back healthy and strong:



Family Health Team

- **Exercise regularly:** perform low-impact aerobic activities to improve function of your muscles (e.g. walking or swimming).
- **Build strength and flexibility:** Abdominal and back muscle exercises (core-strengthening) help condition the muscles of your back. Flexibility in the hips and upper legs aligns your pelvic bones and minimizes the risk of injury.
- **Maintain a healthy weight:** Being overweight can put stress on the muscles and joints in your back.
- **Stand smart:** Good posture can reduce the stress on back muscles. Maintain a neutral pelvic position. If you must stand for long periods of time, place one foot on a low footstool to take some of the load off your lower back. Alternate feet.
- **Sit smart:** Choose a seat with good lower back support, armrests and a swivel base. Keep your knees and hips level. Change your position frequently, at least every half-hour. Stand every 20-30 minutes to avoid hours of uninterrupted time sitting.
- **Lift smart:** Avoid heavy lifting, if possible. If you must lift something heavy, let your legs do the work. Keep your back straight and bend only at the knees. Do not twist. Hold the load close to your body. Find a lifting partner if the object is heavy or awkward to maneuver.

When to call the WCFHT



Most cases of back pain gradually improve within a few weeks. If your pain is not improving significantly within a few weeks, you may benefit from a visit with a physiotherapist. If any of the following signs or symptoms accompany your back pain, call us for advice.

- Problems with bowel or bladder control
- Back pain is caused by a fall or injury to your back
- Back pain is severe and does not go away, even at night or when lying down
- Pain spreads down one or both legs, especially if pain extends below the knee
- Causes weakness, numbness or tingling in your legs
- Back pain accompanied with unexplained fever or weight loss
- Use of steroid medicine, such as prednisone, on a regular basis
- You have diabetes or a medical problem that weakens your immune system
- A history of cancer or osteoporosis
- Back pain does not improve significantly within a few weeks

For more information...

What You Should Know About Acute Back Pain¹

<https://actt.albertadoctors.org/CPGs/Lists/CPGDocumentList/LBP-Patient-Handout-Acute.pdf>

What You Should Know About Chronic Back Pain²

<https://actt.albertadoctors.org/CPGs/Lists/CPGDocumentList/LBP-Patient-Handout-Chronic.pdf>

Imaging Tests for Lower Back Pain: When You Need Them – And When You Don't³

<https://choosingwiselycanada.org/imaging-tests-low-back-pain/>

(Video) Dr. Mike Evans - Low Back Pain Patient Self-Management⁴

<https://www.reframehealthlab.com/low-back-pain-video/>

Inter-professional Spine Assessment and Education Clinics – Positions of Relief, Stretches and Exercises⁵

<http://www.isaec.org/isaec-exercise-videos.html>

[1] Toward Optimized Practice, Institute of Health Economics. What you should know about your acute low back pain [Internet]. 2015 [cited 2020 Jan 20]. Available from: <https://actt.albertadoctors.org/CPGs/Lists/CPGDocumentList/LBP-Patient-Handout-Acute.pdf>

[2] Toward Optimized Practice, Institute of Health Economics. What you should know about your chronic low back pain [Internet]. 2015 [cited 2020 Jan 20]. Available from: <https://actt.albertadoctors.org/CPGs/Lists/CPGDocumentList/LBP-Patient-Handout-Chronic.pdf>

[3] Choosing Wisely Canada. Imaging tests for lower back pain: When you need them – and when you don't [Internet]. 2014 Apr 2 [cited 2018 May 2]. Available from: <http://www.choosingwiselycanada.org/materials/imaging-tests-for-lower-back-pain-when-you-need-them-and-when-you-dont/>

[4] Evans M. Low back pain. 2014 Jan 24 [cited 2018 May 2]. Available from: <https://www.reframehealthlab.com/low-back-pain-video/>

[5] ISAEC Exercise Videos for Patients. [cited 2019 July 18]. Available from: <http://www.isaec.org/isaec-exercise-videos.html>

