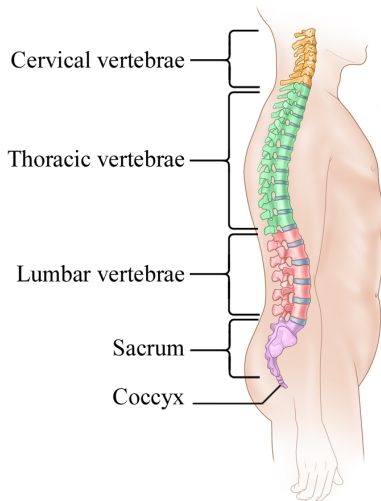


Back Pain: Acute Low Back Pain



Almost everyone has low back pain at one time or another. The lower back bears most of your weight. Because of this, it is easily injured when you lift, reach, or twist. The good news is that most low back pain goes away with some basic self-care. If your pain is very bad or lasts more than a couple of weeks, call your doctor.

Who gets acute low back pain?

Back pain is very common in adults. About two-thirds of adults have low back pain at some point in their lives. Fortunately, most people recover in several weeks.

Some people are more at risk than others. A risk factor is anything that means you are more likely to have acute low back pain.

Risk factors that you cannot change

- Being middle-aged or older
- Being male
- Having a family history of back pain
- Having had a previous back injury
- Having had compression fractures of the spine

Risk factors that you can change

- Lack of regular exercise
- Job or other activities that require long periods of sitting, lifting heavy objects, bending or twisting, repetitive motions, or constant vibration, such as using a jackhammer or driving certain types of heavy equipment
- Smoking. Smokers are more likely than nonsmokers to have disc injuries.
- Being overweight. Excess body weight, especially around the waist, may put strain on your back.
- Poor posture. Once your back has been strained or injured, bad posture can make your pain worse.
- Chronic coughing, which puts lots of stress on your spine
- Wearing high-heeled shoes

What causes acute low back pain?

Back injuries are the most common cause of acute low back pain. Injuries often happen when you use your back muscles for something they are not used to, such as lifting a heavy object or doing yard work. You can also hurt your back by tripping, falling a short distance, or twisting your back too far.

Moving, lifting, standing, sitting, or sleeping in an awkward way can strain your back. Sometimes you do not notice the pain until later.

Other serious causes of back pain, such as infection, a tumor, or cancer, are rare.

What are the symptoms of acute low back pain?

A back sprain or strain may cause:

- Muscle spasms, cramping, and stiffness.
- Pain that is mostly in your back and buttocks.
- Pain that is at its worst the first 48 to 72 hours, followed by days or weeks of less severe pain.

Symptoms of nerve root pressure include:

- Leg pain that extends below the knee or that you feel in the front of your thigh.
- Pain that is worse when you sit, stand for a long time, or bend forward.
- Tingling, numbness, or weakness in the legs.
- Weakness in both legs and loss of bladder or bowel control. These are symptoms of cauda equina syndrome, which needs emergency care.

Symptoms of arthritis of the spine include:

- Pain and stiffness in your back and buttock areas.
- Pain that starts gradually and gets worse over time. It lasts longer than 3 to 6 months.
- Pain that is worse in the morning and after a long period of inactivity.
- Pain that gets better when you move around.

What can you do for acute low back pain?

Most low back pain will get better if you take these steps:

- Try using a heating pad on a low or medium setting for 15 to 20 minutes every

2 to 3 hours. Or you can buy single-use heat wraps that last up to 8 hours. You can also try an ice pack for 10 to 15 minutes every 2 to 3 hours.

- Take over-the-counter pain medicine if needed, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol, for example) or an anti-inflammatory drug such as aspirin or ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin, for example). These medicines usually work best if you take them on a regular schedule instead of waiting until the pain gets worse.
- For the first day or two, rest in a comfortable position. Try lying on your side with a pillow between your knees. Or lie on your back on the floor with a pillow under your knees.
- As soon as you can, get back to your normal activities. Movement helps your muscles stay strong. Staying in bed for more than 1 or 2 days can actually make your problem worse.

When is acute low back pain an emergency?

Although most acute low back pain improves on its own, the pain can sometimes be a symptom of a more serious problem. **Call 911 or other emergency services immediately** if you have:

- Pain in the upper back and chest that may be caused by a heart attack. This kind of pain may feel crushing or squeezing, or like a heavy weight on the chest.
- Severe back pain that is not from any known injury.
- Loss of bowel or bladder control and weakness in the arms or legs right after a severe back injury.

