

What is back pain?

Irritation or damage to any area of the back muscles, structures or spine can cause back pain. It commonly occurs in the lower back.

The spine consists of many bones called vertebrae, which are joined together. Each vertebrae has a bony joint called a facet joint and between each pair of vertebrae lies a disc, which acts as a cushion and provides shock absorption. Muscles and ligaments assist to provide stability to the spine

What causes back pain?

Back pain is usually caused by an injury to the back such as overstretching during lifting, bending or twisting. This may result in damage to muscles, ligaments or the discs. Back pain is common and affects most people at some time in their life. Factors that can contribute to back pain include:

- Bad work practices and lifting techniques
- Poor posture
- Being overweight
- Lack of exercise
- Pregnancy
- Stress
- Smoking.

Treatment

Treatment depends on the cause. Your doctor or health care professional will have examined you to check for any nerve damage and rule out more serious problems.

X-rays are helpful only in certain cases as they show only bones, and not the soft tissues such as ligaments, discs and nerves. If significant nerve damage is suspected, tests such as a CT scan or MRI might be ordered. Patients with severe injuries may need to see an orthopaedic surgeon or neurosurgeon for further treatment. This may include injections or, in extreme cases, surgery (an operation).

Most back pain tends to improve within a few days to a few weeks, and a therapist such as a physiotherapist, chiropractor or osteopath can assist with exercises, advice and treatment. Bulging discs and pinched nerves may take longer to heal. Few people require surgery.

Home care

In the first two to three days you should aim to minimise pain and assist healing.

- Wrap ice cubes in a damp tea towel, use frozen peas or a sports ice pack (never apply ice straight onto the skin) and apply to the back for 20 minutes, every one to two hours when awake.
- Avoid 'HARM' – Heat, Alcohol, Re-injury and Massage for the first few days as this will increase inflammation and swelling (even though it may feel good at the time).
- Avoid activities you do not really need to do. Sit as little as possible until the pain settles. Avoid extended car travel unless absolutely necessary. Do not sit with your 'feet up'. When sitting on an upright chair, push your bottom right back into the chair and ensure the hollow of your back is supported.
- When resting, lie on your back, stomach, or on your side, supported by pillows.
- Keep moving. Walk as much as you feel comfortable doing. Initially this may not be far and may require the use of crutches or a walking frame. Walk regularly and gradually increase the distances.
- Take painkillers when necessary. Do not expect medications to get rid of the pain completely. Most back pain improves with time. Do not let pain rule your life. Find other ways to do things that are causing you pain.

How can I prevent back pain?

- Stay active, control your weight, and keep a good posture at all times.
- Do not smoke.
- Do back exercises to keep your back flexible and strong.
- Speak to a physiotherapist.
- When lifting, use your legs and not your back. Hold objects as close to your body as possible and use both arms.
- If working at a desk, make sure it is set up properly so you have a good posture – do not twist, do not look up or down at the computer screen.

Exercises

These are likely to be helpful, but get advice if they do not help or aggravate the pain.

- Lie face down – if easy, gradually prop up onto the elbows, as high as is comfortable.
- While standing, arch your back with your hands on your lower back or buttocks.

These exercises can be repeated for 5 – 10 times every 1–2 hours.

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

Notes:

Follow up with:

Date and Time-

Name-

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Seeking help

In a medical emergency go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

For other medical problems see your local Doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional
- Visit a physiotherapist, chiropractor or osteopath.
- Visit HealthInsite
www.healthinsite.gov.au
- Visit the Better Health Channel
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au