

The Spine Column

A Special Newsletter
for MVP Members





Low Back Pain

What is low back pain?

Low back pain can happen anywhere below the ribs and above the legs. It is possible to hurt your back when you lift, reach, or twist. In fact, almost everyone has low back pain at one time or another.

What causes low back pain?

Causes of low back pain include:

- Overuse, strain, or injury
- Aging
- Herniated disc
- Arthritis
- Compression fractures
- Illness
- A spine problem you were born with.

Often doctors don't really know what causes low back pain.

What are the symptoms?

Depending on the cause, low back pain can cause a range of symptoms. The pain may be dull or sharp. It may be in one small area or over a broad area. You may have muscle spasms.

Low back pain can also cause leg symptoms, such as pain, numbness, or tingling, often extending below the knee.

A rare but serious problem called cauda equina syndrome can occur if the nerves at the end of the spinal cord are squeezed. Seek emergency treatment if you have weakness or numbness in both legs or you lose bladder or bowel control.

Most low back pain is short-term (acute) and will go away in a few weeks. It is more likely to become long-lasting (chronic) if you are depressed or under stress.

How is low back pain diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask questions about your past health, symptoms, and activities. He or she will also do a physical exam. Your answers and the exam can help rule out a serious cause for the pain. In most cases, doctors are able to recommend treatment after the first exam.

Tests such as X-rays, CT scans, and MRIs usually don't help.

But if you have a back pain problem that has lasted longer than 6 weeks, or if your doctor thinks you may have more than muscle pain, it might be time for one of these tests.

How is it treated?

Most low back pain will improve with basic first aid, which includes continuing to do light activity such as walking, and taking over-the-counter pain medicine as needed.

Walking is the simplest and maybe the best exercise for the lower back. It gets your blood moving and helps your muscles stay strong.

Your doctor or physical therapist can recommend more specific exercises to help your back muscles get stronger. These may include a series of simple exercises called core stabilization. Strengthening the muscles in your trunk can improve your posture, keep your body in better balance, and lower your chance of injury.

If your symptoms are severe or you still have symptoms after 2 weeks of self-care, see your doctor. You may need stronger pain medicines, or you might benefit from manual therapy.

Each of the various treatments for back pain work for some people but not for others. You may need to try different things to see which work best for you, such as:

- Spinal manipulation
- Massage
- Acupuncture

Having ongoing (chronic) back pain can make you depressed. In turn, depression can have an effect on your level of pain and whether your back gets better. People with depression and chronic pain often benefit from both antidepressant medicines and counseling. Counseling can help you learn stress management and pain control skills.

How can you prevent low back pain from returning?

After you've had low back pain, you're likely to have it again. But there are some things you can do to help prevent it. And they can help you get better faster if you do have low back pain again.

To help keep your back healthy and avoid further pain:

- Practice good posture when you sit, stand, and walk. "Good posture" generally means your ears, shoulders, and hips are in a straight line.
- Get regular, low-impact exercise. Walk, swim, or ride a stationary bike. Stretch before you exercise.
- Sleep on your side.
- Watch your weight.
- Don't try to lift things that are too heavy for you. When you must lift, learn the right way to lift.

If you sit or stand for long periods at work:

- Sit or stand up straight, with your shoulders back.
- Make sure your chair fits you and has good back support.
- Take regular breaks to walk around.

If your work involves a lot of bending, reaching, or lifting:

- Talk to your human resources department to see if there are other ways you can do your work.
- Don't depend on a "back belt" to protect your back.

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MVP Health Care offers a condition health management program for members living with chronic back pain. For more information or to see if you qualify, call **1-866-942-7966**. MVP's program is based on the Institute for Clinical Systems Improvement's (ICSI) health care guidelines for the treatment of adult low back pain.

Information in this newsletter does not constitute medical advice. If you have questions about your health, talk to your doctor.

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For more information,
call **1-866-942-7966**

Monday–Friday, 8:30 am–5:00 pm.

TTY: **1-800-662-1220**

We value your opinion.

Please fill out a brief, anonymous survey at mvplistsens.com. We will use this information to create a better experience for all of our members. All responses are 100 percent confidential. The survey only takes a few minutes to complete.



Quick Tips for Being Prepared to Talk to Your Doctor

Patients who have good relationships with their doctors are more satisfied with their care and have better results. Here are some tips to help you and your doctor become better partners in improving your health care:

- Write down your questions before your visit. List the most important ones first to make sure they get asked and answered.
- Bring a “health history” list with you, and keep it up to date.
- Always bring any medications you are taking, including over-the-counter, or a list of those medications (include when and how often you take them) and what strength.
- You might want to bring someone along to help you ask questions and remember the answers.
- Find more information and printable forms at mvphhealthcare.com.

Source: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)



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