

How is back pain treated?

Most low back pain can be treated without surgery. Treatment involves using analgesics, reducing inflammation, restoring proper function and strength to the back, and preventing recurrence of the injury. Most patients with back pain recover without residual functional loss. Patients should contact a doctor if there is not a noticeable reduction in pain and inflammation after 72 hours of self-care.

Although *ice and heat* (the use of cold and hot compresses) have never been scientifically proven to quickly resolve low back injury, compresses may help reduce pain and inflammation and allow greater mobility for some individuals. As soon as possible following trauma, patients should apply a cold pack or a cold compress (such as a bag of ice or bag of frozen vegetables wrapped in a towel) to the tender spot several times a day for up to 20 minutes. After 2 to 3 days of cold treatment, they should then apply heat (such as a heating lamp or hot pad) for brief periods to relax muscles and increase blood flow. Warm baths may also help relax muscles. Patients should avoid sleeping on a heating pad, which can cause burns and lead to additional tissue damage.

Bed rest — 1–2 days at most. A 1996 Finnish study found that persons who continued their activities without bed rest following onset of low back pain appeared to have better back flexibility than those who rested in bed for a week. Other studies suggest that bed rest alone may make back pain worse and can lead to secondary complications such as depression, decreased muscle tone, and blood clots in the legs. Patients should resume activities as soon as possible. At night or during rest, patients should lie on one side, with a pillow between the knees (some doctors suggest resting on the back and putting a pillow beneath the knees).

Exercise may be the most effective way to speed recovery from low back pain and help strengthen back and abdominal muscles. Maintaining and building muscle strength is particularly important for persons with skeletal irregularities. Doctors and physical therapists can provide a list of gentle exercises that help keep muscles moving and speed the recovery process. A routine of back-healthy activities may include stretching exercises, swimming, walking, and movement therapy to improve coordination and develop proper posture and muscle balance. Yoga is another way to gently stretch muscles and ease pain. Any mild discomfort felt at the start of these exercises should disappear as muscles become stronger. But if pain is more than mild and lasts more than 15 minutes during exercise, patients should stop exercising and contact a doctor.

Medications are often used to treat acute and chronic low back pain. Effective pain relief may involve a combination of prescription drugs and over-the-counter remedies. Patients should always check with a doctor before taking drugs for pain relief. Certain medicines, even those sold over the counter, are unsafe during pregnancy, may conflict with other medications, may cause side effects including drowsiness, or may lead to liver damage.

Spinal manipulation is literally a “hands-on” approach in which trained specialists (such as chiropractors, osteopaths, and massage therapists) use leverage and a series of exercises to adjust spinal structures and restore back mobility. These specialists do not prescribe drugs or use surgery in their treatment of low back pain.

Prepared by:
Office of Communications and Public Liaison
National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke
National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, MD 20892