

Learn how to banish back pain

By Zachary Child

Low back pain is one of the most common conditions that afflicts adults. In fact, experts estimate that 80 to 100 percent of adult Americans will have at least one severe episode of low back pain in their lives.

To some degree, back pain is a normal process of aging. Like gray hairs appearing on our head, our spine will age, and some discomfort will come along with it. However, it's important to understand the difference between common pain and something more serious—as well as what kinds of treatments can get you back on your feet.



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Common complaints

A low back ache or muscle spasm, brought about by heavy activity, by periods of immobility such as long drives, or upon waking in the morning, is typical of functional arthritic low back pain. Severe flare-ups can cause painful, rigid spasms and seemingly uncontrollable pain. The incidence of this type of back pain increases with age and if you have arthritis. Treatments such as those outlined in the next section usually ease the pain within one to two weeks. But watch for red flags including:

- Fever or chills

- Pain that worsens at night or with rest
- Neurologic symptoms such as radiating arm or leg pain, bladder incontinence, or paralysis

If you have any of these symptoms, or if pain doesn't resolve in a few weeks, call your doctor.

Treatments to try

Exercise. You may have heard that "motion is lotion" for bones and joints. Evidence shows that activities such as physical therapy and yoga help strengthen the back and spine.

Weight loss. Studies estimate that an extra pound of body weight loads the spine by 4 to 8 pounds. That means losing 10 pounds of excess weight might unload 40 to 80 pounds of pressure from your spine.

Heat and ice. Both are effective, so you can choose whichever works best for you.

Medication. Inflammation plays a large role in back pain. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen and naproxen work by blocking the biochemical signals of pain and inflammation. Corticosteroids are a more powerful anti-inflammatory medication but can cause more side effects. Other medications might include muscle relaxers or nerve stabilizers.

Chiropractic care and acupuncture. These are widely accepted treatments that appear to benefit many people. It's wise to talk with your primary care provider before beginning this treatment. It may carry risk if you have a history of stroke or carotid artery stenosis.

If your back is acting up, know that you don't have to live with the pain. Talk with your doctor about treatment options that will get you back to your regular routine.

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