

Back pain

At some point, most of us will suffer from back pain. It can happen because of something as small as sleeping in a strange position. Or, it can be from something more serious like an accident or injury.

With 63% of Americans now overweight or obese,¹ back pain is on the rise due to the strain of that excess weight on the body.¹ Back pain is one of the most common reasons people visit a doctor or miss work.²

How to avoid problems³

Fortunately, there are things you can do to lower how often you have back pain — and how bad it gets.

- Exercise on a regular basis to increase muscle strength and balance.
- Use good posture.
- Eat a healthy diet with plenty of calcium and vitamin D to strengthen your spine. This also helps prevent osteoporosis (a thinning of bone tissue and loss of bone density over time).
- Don't lift anything heavy. Be sure to support your back by keeping it straight when you do have to lift heavy objects and always lift with your leg muscles.
- Stay at a healthy body weight.
- Don't smoke. Smoking restricts blood flow to the discs that cushion your vertebrae, lowers calcium absorption and prevents new bone growth.
- Moderation! Don't be a weekend warrior with sports or overdo it with chores around the house.
- Try to lower the stress in your life.
- Keep your core muscles strong.

Common causes of back pain⁴

Injuries: Most causes of back pain are simple muscle or ligament strains and fractures that can cause short-term or long-term (chronic) pain. Strains are tears in the ligaments that support the spine. They can happen when you twist or lift the wrong way. Fractures can be caused by osteoporosis or from falls or other accidents.

Problems with your spine: A common problem that happens as we age is intervertebral disk degeneration. That's when the disks between the vertebrae break down and lose their cushioning ability. Other problems include muscle spasms, tension and ruptured or herniated disks.

Other health conditions: Scoliosis, arthritis, pregnancy, kidney stones or infections, endometriosis, osteoporosis and fibromyalgia can all cause back pain. Spinal stenosis, a narrowing of the spinal column, puts pressure on the spinal cord and nerves.

When is back pain serious?

Most back pain goes away on its own with the right exercise and preventive steps, but some back pain may be a sign of other health problems. Be sure to talk to your doctor if:⁵

- Pain goes down your leg below your knee.
- Your leg, foot, groin or rectal area feels numb.
- You have fever, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, weakness or sweating.
- You lose control over going to the bathroom.
- Your pain was caused by an injury.
- Your pain is so intense you can't move around.
- Your pain doesn't seem to be getting better after two to three weeks.



Sources:

1 WebMD. *Percentage of Overweight, Obese Americans Swells* (2010); webmd.com

2 American Chiropractic Association. *Back Pain Facts and Statistics* (Accessed July 2012); acatoday.org

3 North American Spine Society. *9 Back to Basics* (2012); knowyourback.org

4 National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases. *Handout on Health: Back Pain* (2012); niams.nih.gov

5 American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP). *Lower Back Pain* (Accessed January 2013); familydoctor.org

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