



## Low Back Pain – What You Should Know

Almost all of us suffer from low back pain at one time or another. **Most low back pain goes away by itself in less than six weeks, often without any treatment.** However, it can be difficult to know when medical treatment for low back pain is necessary. Following are some common questions we've answered concerning low back pain.

### What causes low back pain?

Low back pain is most often caused by common conditions that can easily be treated:

- Overuse, strain, or minor injury
- Disc changes (discs are the pads, or shock absorbers, between your vertebrae)
- Arthritis (joint inflammation)
- Bony growths that press on nerves
- Spinal stenosis (narrowing of the spinal canal)

But low back pain also can be caused by less common and potentially more serious things as well, including:

- Infection
- Cancer or other tumor

Whatever the cause, symptoms of low back pain can vary. Your pain may be dull or it may be sharp. You may feel pain in a very small area, or over a broad area of your back. You may also feel pain, numbness or tingling into the back of your leg, and even down below your knee.

### When should I worry about my symptoms?

When it comes to back pain, the severity of the problem does not always match the symptoms. Sometimes, minor problems cause more severe pain, and dangerous problems cause minor pain.

You should see your doctor right away if you have low back pain with:

- Significant trauma which may have broken a bone
- Unexplained weight loss
- Unexplained fever
- A history of cancer
- IV drug use
- Ongoing use of steroid medication
- Osteoporosis
- Age over 70 years
- A weakened immune system
- Loss of control of your urine or stool
- Loss of feeling or strength in your leg or legs

You should also see your doctor if you have had low back pain that is continually worsening in severity, or low back pain that has been present for six weeks without getting significantly better.



## What can I do about my low back pain?

As mentioned, most acute low back pain will resolve within about a month without tests, images or surgery. Regular, light activity, such as walking, has been shown to be perhaps the best exercise for low back pain. Staying active will help you to recover faster. Your healthcare provider or physical therapist may recommend additional exercises to strengthen your core. Pay attention to your body, and don't overdo it.

You may want to try over-the-counter NSAID medicine such as ibuprofen or naproxen. Ask your healthcare provider if these are safe for you depending on your other medical conditions and medications, and take only as directed. Acetaminophen is an option for patients who cannot take NSAIDs. If back pain has caused you to become depressed, seek care for your depression, as this can help your pain as well.

Massage, spinal manipulation, acupuncture and stress reduction have also been shown to help low back pain.

Once your pain has resolved, continue to strengthen your core and stretch your back muscles. Maintain a healthy weight. Learn to sit with good posture, to lift using your legs, and to get up and move frequently to prevent back pain.



**Walking has been shown to be perhaps the best exercise for low back pain.**

## Do I need an MRI, CT scan, or even a regular X-ray?

There are clear guidelines that your doctor will follow to determine whether or not you should have an X-ray, a CT scan, or an MRI. Your healthcare provider will examine and interview you to determine whether you should have diagnostic imaging done.

**Most adults with low back pain do not need an imaging test, such as an X-ray or MRI, which can expose patients to unnecessary radiation and cost.** Here are some guidelines concerning whether your doctor may order diagnostic imaging:

- Most fractures are caused by significant trauma, and imaging may be needed.
- Herniated discs often don't need imaging; they can usually be diagnosed with your history and physical exam, and they generally improve in time without any aggressive treatment.
- If you have had a significant trauma, or have other high-risk factors (such as osteoporosis or chronic steroid use) and have had a minor trauma, your doctor may order an X-ray or, in some cases, a CT scan, to make sure you did not break a bone.
- If you experience low back pain associated with sudden onset of urinary or bowel symptoms such as incontinence, numbness in your buttocks, inner thighs and genital area, or muscle weakness in your legs, your provider will order an MRI right away.

**ORLANDO**  
**HEALTH®**

OrlandoHealth.com