Back Pain

Back pain is one of the most common medical problems, affecting eight out of 10 people at some point during their lives. Back pain can range from a dull, constant ache to sudden, sharp pain.

Acute back pain comes on suddenly and usually lasts from a few days to a few weeks. Back pain is called chronic if it lasts for more than three months.

Cause

Most acute back pain is the result of trauma to the lower back or a disorder such as arthritis. Pain from trauma may be caused by a sports injury, work around the house or in the garden, or a sudden jolt such as a car accident or other stress on spinal bones and tissues.

Chronic back pain is pain that persists for more than three months. It is often progressive and the cause can be difficult to determine.

Some causes of back pain include:

- Disc breakdown
- Ruptured discs
- Stress
- Spasms
- Tense muscles
- Injuries from sprains, fractures, accidents and falls
- Scoliosis
- Spondylolisthesis
- Arthritis
- Spinal stenosis
- Pregnancy
- Kidney stones
- Infections
- Endometriosis
- Fibromyalgia

Frequency of Occurrence

Anyone can have back pain, but some things that increase the risk are:

- **Getting older:** Back pain is more common the older people get. The first signs of back pain can occur in people 30 to 40 years old.

- **Poor physical fitness:** Back pain is more common in people who are not fit.
- **Being overweight:** A diet high in calories and fat can make people gain weight. Too much weight can stress the back and cause pain.
- **Inherited diseases or conditions:** Some kinds of back pain, such as disc disease, can be inherited.
- **Other diseases:** Some types of arthritis and cancer can cause back pain.
- **Employment:** If an employee has to lift, push or pull while twisting the spine, he or she may get back pain. If a person works at a desk all day and does not sit up straight, this may also result in back pain.
- **Smoking:** The body may not be able to get enough nutrients in the discs in the back if a person smokes. Smoker's cough may also cause back pain. People who smoke are slow to heal, so back pain may last longer.
- **Race:** Black women are two to three times more likely than white women to have part of the lower spine slip out of place.

Signs and Symptoms

Back pain can range from a dull, constant ache to a sudden, sharp pain that makes it hard to move. It can start quickly if someone falls or lifts something too heavy, or it can get worse slowly.

See a doctor if these symptoms are present:

- Numbness or tingling
- Severe pain that does not improve with rest
- Pain after a fall or an injury
- Trouble urinating
- Weakness
- Numbness in the legs
- Fever
- Weight loss when not on a diet

Diagnosing the Disease

Individuals should contact a doctor if there is not a noticeable reduction in pain and inflammation after 72 hours of self-care.

A doctor may choose the following tests to diagnose the problem:

- X-rays
- Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)
- Computed tomography (CT) scan
- Blood tests

Treatment

Treatment for back pain depends on what kind of pain is present.

Acute back pain usually gets better without any treatment, but the patient may want to take acetaminophen, aspirin or ibuprofen to help ease the pain.

Exercise and surgery are not usually used to treat acute back pain.

The following are some types of treatments for chronic back pain:

- **Hot or Cold Packs (or both):** Heat reduces muscle spasms and pain. Cold helps reduce swelling and numbs deep pain. Using hot or cold packs may relieve pain, but this treatment does not fix the cause of chronic back pain.
- **Exercise:** Proper exercise can help ease chronic pain but should not be used for acute back pain. A doctor or physical therapist can prescribe the best types of exercise to do.
- **Medications**, including:
  - Analgesic medications are over-the-counter drugs such as acetaminophen and aspirin or prescription pain medications.
  - Topical analgesics are creams, ointments, and salves rubbed onto the skin over the site of pain.
  - Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are drugs that reduce both pain and swelling. NSAIDs include over-the-counter drugs such as ibuprofen, ketoprofen and naproxen sodium. Your doctor may prescribe stronger NSAIDs.
  - Muscle relaxants and some antidepressants have also been prescribed for chronic back pain, but it is not yet known if they work for back pain. Behavior Changes. Learning to lift, push and pull with less stress on the back. Changing exercise, relaxation and sleep patterns can help lessen back pain. Eating a healthy diet and not smoking also help.
- **Injections.** A doctor may suggest steroid or numbing shots to lessen the pain.
- **Complementary and Alternative Medical Treatments.** When back pain becomes chronic or when other treatments do not relieve it, some people try complementary and alternative treatments, including:
  - **Manipulation:** Professionals use their hands to adjust or massage the spine or nearby tissues.
  - **Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS):** A small box over the painful area sends mild electrical pulses to nerves. Studies have shown that TENS treatments are not always effective for reducing pain.
  - **Acupuncture:** This Chinese practice uses thin needles to relieve pain and restore health. Acupuncture may be effective when used as a part of a comprehensive treatment plan for low back pain.
  - **Acupressure:** A therapist applies pressure to certain places in the body to relieve pain. Acupressure has not been well studied for back pain.

Most people with chronic back pain do not need surgery. It is usually used for chronic back pain if other treatments do not work.

Surgery may be necessary for the following back conditions:

- **Herniated disc:** When one or more of the discs that cushion the bones of the spine are damaged, the jelly-like center of the disc leaks, causing pain.
- **Spinal stenosis:** This condition causes the spinal canal to become narrow.
- **Spondylolisthesis:** This occurs when one or more bones of the spine slip out of place.
- **Vertebral fractures:** A fracture can be caused by a blow to the spine or by crumbling of the bone due to osteoporosis.
- **Degenerative disc disease:** As people age, some have discs that break down and cause severe pain.

Rarely, when back pain is caused by a tumor, an infection or a nerve root problem called cauda equina syndrome, surgery is needed immediately to ease the pain and prevent more problems.

Currently, researchers are examining the use of different drugs to effectively treat back pain, in particular, chronic pain that has lasted at least six months.

Other studies are comparing different health care approaches to the management of acute low back pain (standard care versus chiropractic, acupuncture or massage therapy).

These studies are measuring symptom relief, restoration of function and patient satisfaction. Other research is comparing standard surgical treatments to the most commonly used standard nonsurgical treatments to measure changes in health-related quality of life among patients suffering from spinal stenosis.

Prevention

Exercise often and keep back muscles strong.

Maintain a healthy weight or lose weight if necessary. To have strong bones, people need to get enough calcium and vitamin D every day.

Try to stand up straight and avoid heavy lifting whenever possible. When it is necessary to lift something heavy, bend the legs and keep the back straight.

Resources

Some content on this page was gathered from the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, a division of the United States National Library of Medicine (NLM). The NLM is part of the National Institutes of Health, an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services: www.nlm.nih.gov.

Further information on the treatments for back pain can be found online:

- American Chronic Pain Association (ACPA): www.theacpa.org
- American Association of Neurological Surgeons: www.aans.org
- American Academy of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation: www.aapmr.org

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