



# How to Care for Your Acute Low Back Pain

Almost everyone will have back pain at one point in their life. The good news is that most low back pain will go away in four to six weeks with good self care. However, between 60 and 86% of us will have the pain return unless we actively try to prevent it. If you have sprained or strained your back, have muscle spasms, sciatica, arthritis, or degenerative discs, you may benefit from following the advice presented here.

One of the best ways to care for your back is to sit and lie in comfortable, supported positions. For example:

- When you lie on your back, keep your knees bent or support your back by placing one or more large pillows under your knees.
- When you lie on your side, keep your knees bent and place pillows between the knees.
- When you sit, use a small or medium towel roll behind your low back.

## Alternate your activities

- Change positions every 20-30 minutes.
- Limit or avoid activities that increase your symptoms.
- If walking does not make your pain worse, walk 5 to 10 minutes several times each day.
- Limit your sitting as much as possible.

## Use ice or heat

- Put a cold or ice pack on your back for 10 to 15 minutes several times each day. For severe pain, repeat every hour. Place a thin towel between your skin and the cold or ice pack to prevent a rash or burn.
- Ice is usually best at first. If heat feels better, follow the same directions as above.

## Tests to diagnose back pain

Most people do not need testing. Imaging tests such as X-rays, CT scans and MRI are not helpful for diagnosing most episodes of low back pain. In most cases they are only used if the doctor suspects a serious problem, such as a herniated disc, broken bone, cancer, or if surgery is being considered or planned.

## Daily activities

Using good body mechanics for all of your daily activities can help your back pain and keep it from getting worse. Keep your back straight (do not twist) when getting out of bed. Bend at your hips and knees (not your back) when doing tasks that require bending forward such as brushing your teeth, putting things into and out of the trunk of a car, and when lifting.



## Medicines for back pain

If the doctor gave you a prescription medicine for pain, take it exactly as directed. If you are not taking a prescription pain medicine, ask your doctor if you can take an over-the-counter medicine. Many pain medicines, such as *Tylenol*, have acetaminophen, and too much acetaminophen can be harmful.

## Call your doctor when you have ...

- Severe pain in your belly, back or chest.
- Recent changes in your bowel or bladder control or difficulty initiating urination.
- Any new weakness or numbness in one or both legs.
- A fever that does not go away.
- Pain or numbness in the genital region.



# How to Care for Your Acute Low Back Pain (page 2)

## Unload your back with self-traction

At times, taking pressure off your back by unloading it (self traction) will make you feel better. Unload your back frequently throughout the day using the following techniques. Be gentle and hold each for 10 to 15 seconds. Repeat as often as needed for pain relief.

### Lying

Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet on the floor or propped up on a chair. Place your hands on your hips or upper thighs. Gently push into your thighs until you feel relief.



### Standing

Lean on a counter, wall, or dresser. Gently take weight off your feet in this position until you feel relief.



### Sitting

Place your hands on the armrests or on the seat. Gently push down with your hands, shifting your weight to your arms until you feel relief.



## Other resources

Visit [kp.org/mydoctor](https://kp.org/mydoctor) to:

- View most lab results and check your preventive health reminders
- Email your doctor
- Use interactive online tools to help keep you and your family healthy

Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

Consult with your physical therapist or doctor if you experience an increase in your symptoms with recommended exercises, or if you develop new symptoms of numbness, tingling or a spread of the pain. This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.

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