

Managing Acute Low Back Pain

More than 80% of people will develop low back pain sometime in their lives. Low back pain is very common. In fact, it's the second leading reason people visit their doctor and it can affect people of all ages.

Over the years, scientific research has identified some basic prevention and treatment options that work best. This resource summarizes the following:

- What causes low back pain?
- What can I do to relieve my back pain?
- When should I call my doctor?
- What can the providers and staff at CMC/DHK do for my back pain?
- How can I prevent low back pain?

The truth about what causes low back pain

The exact cause of low back pain is often hard to pinpoint. While many theories exist to try to explain back pain by identifying certain structures in the back such as muscles, ligaments, joints and discs, in most cases there is no objective way to prove them. However, in many cases back pain can be quickly improved by maintaining good posture and lifestyle habits.

The good news is that back pain is rarely caused by a serious spinal condition - or any other serious medical condition. Most back pain resolves quickly on its own—at least to the point where you can do normal daily activities without limitation. Just because you may be experiencing back pain today doesn't mean you will have a prolonged limitation from it.

What can I do to relieve my back pain?

Not all back pain episodes require a doctor's visit. You can often manage your pain on your own and return to normal activities as soon as you're ready. Try these suggestions:

Keep moving. It's natural to want to avoid using your back when it hurts. However, for most types of back pain, inactivity - especially bed rest - has been shown to do more harm than good. Bed rest can slow the healing process and make your muscles weaker, tighter, and more painful. Although you do want to avoid activities that make your pain worse, stay as active as possible.



COMMON MYTHS:

BED REST IS BEST
False! Bed rest for more than a day or two can lead to slower recovery and can even worsen back pain. To avoid disability, *keep moving!*

IF THE PAIN IS BAD, THERE MUST BE SPINAL DAMAGE OR SOMETHING OUT OF PLACE
False! The spine is designed to be strong and stable and is reinforced by many powerful muscles and ligaments. Despite common fears that back pain could be a warning sign of a dangerous condition that could progressively worsen or lead to dislocating something in the back, only a small number of patients have a serious condition as the cause of their back pain.

AN X-RAY AND/OR AN MRI WILL ALWAYS IDENTIFY MY PROBLEM.
False! Not all back pain needs x-rays or further imaging in order to get the best care. A good clinical exam is often all that is required.

Find a comfortable position. When you do rest, you may have to experiment with positions to relieve your pain. One position that works well for many people with back pain is to lie on your back with your hips and knees bent, with pillows under your knees. Lying on your side with your knees bent and a pillow between them may also help.

Try heat or ice. Ice can lessen your pain, while heat can loosen tight muscles. Apply ice or heat for 15 minutes at a time each hour. Some people find that alternating heat and ice treatments works best. For icing, try an ice pack or a bag of frozen peas. For heating, try a hot water bottle or a heating pad - or take a warm bath. A barrier, such as a towel, should be placed between the cold pack and the skin's surface to prevent skin and nerve damage.

Try simple pain medication. Pain medications may not eliminate your pain, but they should control it enough that you can be active. The simplest and safest pain relievers are also usually the most effective. These include the following over-the-counter medications: Acetaminophen (generic Tylenol) or Anti-inflammatories, such as ibuprofen (generic, Advil, Nuprin, or Motrin) or naproxen (Aleve). These medications not only help relieve your pain, but also help reduce inflammation. Please check with your healthcare provider before starting any new medications.

When should I call my doctor?



The following symptoms require IMMEDIATE attention.
If you can't reach your doctor, go to the nearest emergency room.

- > Difficulty urinating or controlling urine or blood in your urine.
- > Loss of bowel control.

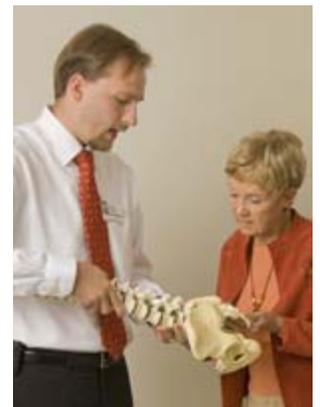
If you develop any of the following symptoms, call your doctor:

- Sudden, severe pain
- Severe pain that gets worse over several weeks instead of getting better
- Worsening numbness or weakness in your legs
- Fever with back pain

What can providers and staff at Cheshire Medical Center/Dartmouth-Hitchcock Keene do for my back pain?

There's no magic cure for back pain. Your doctor may not be able to pinpoint the exact cause of your pain. However, here's what your doctor can do:

- Rule out any serious underlying condition and reassure you.
- Recommend various treatment to help control your pain and prevent disability.



Treatment options

Based on the information gathered in your medical history and physical exam, your doctor may provide the following:

- **Education and activity recommendations.** Your doctor will talk with you about many of the same things presented in this handout, including: avoiding bed rest; staying active; and practicing good body mechanics.
- **Medications for pain relief.** Your doctor may recommend over-the-counter or prescription-strength anti-inflammatories (such as ibuprofen or naproxen) or acetaminophen. For more severe cases, your doctor may recommend a short course of muscle relaxers to help reduce muscle tension and increase ability to move. Back pain rarely requires treatment with steroids or narcotics.
- **Referral to a physical therapist.** A physical therapist can create and supervise an individual program designed just for you. So if your doctor refers you to physical therapy, don't delay your visit. Early treatment tends to produce better results than later treatment.
- **Other.** For most episodes of low back pain, the treatments above should help control your pain and allow you to return to your usual activities. In specific circumstances, your doctor may recommend other treatment options.

**Remember, back pain is rarely due to any serious problem.
Be positive and stay active!**

How can I prevent low back pain?

- **Practice good body mechanics.** The term "body mechanics" refers to how you move and hold your body. Developing good habits is one of the most important things you can do to protect yourself from painful back episodes. The table below lists some Do's and Don't's for good body mechanics.
- **Get regular exercise.** Regular activity keeps your body strong and flexible to help support your back. Establish and maintain a regular exercise program that includes aerobic training (such as walking, swimming, or cycling) as well as stomach and back strengthening.
- **Manage your weight.** Extra pounds put extra stress on your back. To lose weight, eat more fruits, vegetables and low-fat foods. Keep portions small, avoid junk food and exercise regularly! Drink plenty of water.
- **Avoid activities that require heavy lifting, trunk twisting or bodily vibration.** These activities can place stress and strain on your back. Avoid them when possible - and always use proper body mechanics.
- **Reduce stress.** Stress has also been shown to affect low back pain. Stress can cause muscular tension and sometimes spasm. Look at ways to reduce or manage the stress in your life.
- **Don't smoke.** Studies show that smokers have twice as much back pain as non-smokers. Ask your doctor about resources to quit and learn more about our [Tobacco Treatment Programs](#).



Activity	DO	DON'T
Lifting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DO lift and carry objects close to your body. • DO bend your knees as you lift - make your legs do the hard work, not your back. • DO turn with your feet as you lift. • DO know your own strength. Only lift as much as you can handle comfortably. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DON'T lift objects away from your body with arms outstretched. • DON'T lift with your legs straight. • DON'T lift and twist in one motion. • DON'T lift objects that are too heavy for you.
Sitting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DO sit in an upright chair with your knees level with or higher than your hips. Keep your ears, shoulders and hips in a vertical line. • DO sit with a rolled-up towel or other support behind your lower back. • DO stretch and walk around after 30 minutes of sitting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DON'T slouch in your chair. • DON'T sit without back support. • DON'T sit for a long period of time. • Don't cross your legs.
Standing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DO put one foot on a low box or stool. Switch feet every few minutes. • DO have your work surface at a comfortable height. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DON'T stand for a long period of time without changing position. • DON'T use a work surface that is too low (requires you to bend over) or too high (encourages you to raise your shoulders).
Sleeping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DO use a firm mattress or put a board beneath your mattress to add support. • DO sleep on your back with a pillow under your knees or sleep on your side with your knees bent and a pillow between them. 	