

# Back Pain

Back pain affects an estimated 8 out of 10 people. The first attack of low back pain typically occurs between the ages of 30 and 40. Back pain becomes more common with age and can range from a dull, constant ache to a sudden, sharp pain. It can come on suddenly—from an accident, a fall, or lifting something that is too heavy—or it can develop slowly. You can prevent back pain by exercising regularly, eating a healthy diet, and practicing good posture.

In most cases, it is not necessary to see a doctor for back pain; the pain usually goes away with or without treatment. However, you should see a doctor if you experience numbness or tingling, if your pain is severe and does not improve with medications and rest, or if you have pain after a fall or an injury. It is also important to see your doctor if you have pain along with any of the following problems: trouble urinating; weakness, pain, or numbness in your legs; fever; or unintentional weight loss. Such symptoms could signal a serious problem that requires treatment soon.



Hot or cold packs—or sometimes a combination—can be soothing to chronically sore, stiff backs. Heat dilates the blood vessels, improving the supply of oxygen that the blood takes to the back and reducing muscle spasms. Heat also alters the sensation of pain. Cold may reduce inflammation by decreasing the size of blood vessels and the flow of blood to the area. Although cold may feel painful against the skin, it numbs deep pain. Applying heat or cold may relieve pain, but it does not cure the cause of chronic back pain—pain that comes on quickly or slowly, and lasts a long time (3 months or longer).

Although exercise is usually not advisable for acute back pain, proper exercise can help ease chronic pain and may reduce its risk of returning. Acute back pain—pain that hits you suddenly—usually gets better on its own and without treatment, although you may want to try acetaminophen, aspirin, or ibuprofen to help ease the pain. A wide range of medications are used to treat chronic back pain. Some you can try on your own; others require a doctor's prescription.

