

## ACUTE BACK PAIN FAQs

### ***What causes acute low back pain?***

There are many reasons for acute back pain, from muscles pulls, strains, a disk problem in your spine, pinched nerves, arthritis or depression.

Acute low back symptoms can then be classified into one of three working categories:

1. **Potentially serious spinal condition**—tumor, infection or spinal fracture, or a major neurologic compromise, such as cauda equina syndrome
2. **Sciatica**—back-related lower limb symptoms suggesting lumbosacral nerve root compromise.
3. **Nonspecific back symptoms**—occurring primarily in the back that do not suggest nerve root compromise or a serious underlying condition.

Due to the back's complexity, even with modern technology, doctors aren't always able to arrive at a simple diagnosis.

### ***How common is low back pain?***

Low back problems affect virtually everyone at some time. Surveys indicate a yearly prevalence of symptoms in 50 percent of working-age adults; 15 to 20 percent of these persons seek medical care. Low back problems rank high among the reasons for physician office visits and are costly in terms of medical treatment, lost productivity and other factors such as diminished ability to perform or enjoy usual activities. In fact, for persons under age 45, low back problems are the most common cause of disability. Acute low back problems are defined as activity intolerance due to lower back or back-related leg symptoms of less than three months' duration.

### ***How can I prevent low back pain?***

General physical fitness is the best way to prevent low back pain. However, if you have had a problem with your back in the past, you are more likely to have problems in the future. It is important to learn to lift heavy objects by bending your knees instead of bending over to lift the object. You should also try to avoid repeated heavy lifting, and working with vibratory objects such as impact wrenches.

### ***When should I call my doctor?***

In most cases, low back pain goes away within a few days. You should call your primary doctor if:

- Your back pain continues for longer than a month.
- Your back pain starts after you are over 60 years old or before age 20.
- Your pain is worse when you lie down.
- Your pain causes weakness in your leg or numbness in your genital area.
- You have difficulty with your bowels or bladder.
- You have a fever at the same time as the pain.
- You have a history of cancer.
- You have had progressive weight loss.
- Your back pain is caused by a serious injury, such as falling off a ladder.
- Your pain prevents you from walking.
- Your pain or symptoms are getting worse.

### ***When should I have an x-ray, CT scan or MRI?***

These examinations are usually not necessary when you first develop back pain. Because in most people acute back pain will go away on its own, most physicians will not order radiological studies unless the back pain persists. However, even with tests, it can be difficult to pinpoint the exact reason for the pain. You cannot have an MRI if you have metal in your body such as with artificial joints.

### ***What can my family doctor do for my low back pain?***

Your family doctor will first do a careful physical examination. If your doctor does not find a serious problem causing your low back pain, he or she may tell you to rest for a few days, do certain exercises and take medication for pain. Your pain doctor may also refer you to a physical therapist who knows about treating back problems. Sometimes specialized injections are helpful for easing back pain. Injections are usually used only for severe back pain or for back pain that continues for a long time.

### ***What is my chance of recovery?***

About 90 percent of patients with acute low back problems spontaneously recover tolerance to activity within one month if this is the first episode of back pain. With each recurrent episode of back pain, the pain may last longer.

### ***What can I do for my low back pain?***

If you develop low back pain, the first thing to do is to avoid any heavy lifting or bending. Bed rest is usually not necessary, although your doctor may recommend resting for a day or two. Your doctor can give you information about exercises you can do at home to strengthen your back. Gently massaging sore muscles may help them to relax. Over-the-counter pain medications like aspirin or acetaminophen may relieve some of your discomfort.

### ***Will I need surgery?***

Very few people with low back pain ever need surgery. However, if you have a severely damaged disk with weakness in your leg or numbness in your groin, you are more likely to need surgery. Your primary doctor will refer you for surgical opinion to help you decide if surgery is right for you.

### ***What is Chronic Back Pain?***

Chronic back problems are generally defined as back-related activity limitations of greater than three months' duration.

This information provides a general overview on low back pain and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your doctor to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject. H Rand Scott, MD at Newport Pain Management treats low back pain.

Go to [http://paindx.com/Back\\_Pain.html](http://paindx.com/Back_Pain.html) to learn more.