

Taking Care of Your Back

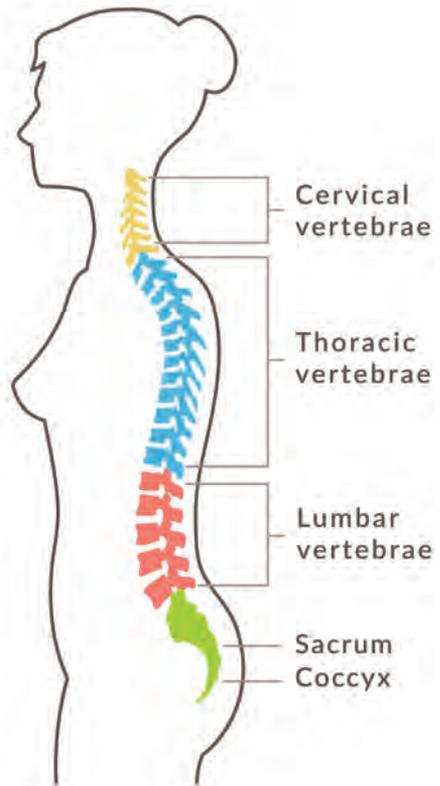


Most people will feel back pain at some point in their lives, but not all back pain is the same for everyone. The good news is, most low back pain improves without any treatment and is not long-term. Knowing what is happening and how to care for it can help speed up your recovery. Having back pain can be frustrating, but having better control over the problem makes it easier to get back to normal activities.

A Guide to Your Back

Learning more about your back and the muscles around the spine, and then changing the way you move, can help you feel less pain. The spine has three sections: cervical (neck), thoracic (mid back), and lumbar (low back). Each section has a curve. These curves keep your body balanced, and the core muscles support the curves to keep your spine stable when you move.

Your spine is made of bones called vertebrae. The joints that connect the vertebrae are facet joints. Between the bones are support structures called disks. Disks are made of tough connective tissue called collagen, and they allow a small amount of movement between vertebrae. The spinal cord and nerves are protected deep within the spine and send signals between the brain and the body. Large, powerful muscles and strong ligaments support the spine and help you maintain your posture and keep your back stable. The core, a group of muscles in the abdomen, back, and hips, work together to stabilize the spine and help control movement.



What are some causes of back pain?

Back pain can have many causes, such as overuse, strain, or injury. It can also be caused by your posture and how you move.

Improper Posture

Back pain is very common. Sitting, standing, and even sleeping are common daily activities that can bother the back. The natural curves of the spine keep the body balanced and avoid straining any part. Try to maintain these curves while sitting, standing, and sleeping.

“Good posture” means keeping your ears, shoulders, and hips in a straight line.



Improper Movement/Repeated Bending, Twisting, or Lifting

Improper movements that cause the spine to bend or twist too much can stress the back and can be a problem if repeated often. Bending and lifting are common daily activities. Keeping the back straight when bending and lifting is a good habit. Rounding or flexing the back is not a good habit and can irritate the back. Twisting while bending or lifting also irritates the back and should be avoided.



Call your doctor right away if you:

- Have major **problems with walking or coordination**
- Notice **new numbness or weakness** in the legs
- Begin to lose **control of your bladder or bowels**
- Have unexplained **weight loss**



Do I need imaging for back pain?

Most people see their back pain improve over time by staying active and using good body mechanics. Imaging (X-rays or scans) is rarely needed for back pain and can be misleading. Normal age-related changes of the spine, such as degenerative joints or bulging disks, are often seen on images of people without pain.

The American Academy of Family Physicians states that imaging does not speed up recovery and uses radiation, which can have harmful effects. Your doctor will do a thorough evaluation and decide if these tests are needed.

What can I do when my back hurts?

Many people are surprised to learn that the best thing to do when having back pain is to stay active. Try exercise and activity that doesn't cause your pain to worsen. Walking short distances and swimming are low-impact ways to stay active.

Complete bed rest does not help back pain. Even a day of bed rest (or resting in a recliner), can decrease your strength and function and cause more back irritation. Continue normal activities, even if it means moving a little slower and taking breaks. Use good body mechanics when getting into and out of bed, standing from a chair, lifting, and doing chores. Moving properly will help reduce pain and prevent further injury.

What can I do to make my back feel better?

There are many types of treatment for back pain. Treatment is different for each person, and it depends on the diagnosis, where the pain is, and how long it has lasted. What works for one person may not work for another.

The goal of treatment is to move better, reduce stress on the spine, and promote healing. Here's how:

- **Stay active!** This may include low-impact exercise such as light walking and swimming.
- **Eat healthy.** Focus on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and other high-fiber foods. Drink plenty of water.

- **Use proper body mechanics** and good posture.
- **Physical therapy.** Physical therapists (or physiotherapists) are highly trained to address body posture, movement, and strategies to improve quality of life. Treatment may include stretches and exercises to strengthen core muscles, posture, and body mechanics.
- **Lose weight.** Extra weight puts more stress on the spine. Losing weight reduces this stress and may result in less pain. Talk with your doctor or health care team about resources to help you lose weight.
- **Quit smoking.** Smoking reduces blood flow to the spine and surrounding tissues, which slows the healing process. Talk with your doctor or health care team about resources to help you quit smoking.
- **Get enough sleep.** Try to get 6 to 8 hours a night.
- **Manage stress.** Stress, depression, and anxiety can increase pain. Staying active with low-impact exercise can relieve stress. Pain psychologists are specially trained to help people manage stress related to pain. Talk with your doctor or health care team about more ways to reduce stress and stay active.

For Kaiser Permanente resources and workshops to help you manage your weight, quit tobacco, improve your sleep, and reduce stress, visit kp.org/centerforhealthyliving.

Your health care team may discuss other treatments if symptoms do not improve. These may include medications, injections, and surgery. If you have any questions, ask your doctor for more information on common treatments for low back pain.

What can I do to reduce pain?

These positions can help reduce pain and relax the muscles. Ask your physical therapist or doctor if you have any questions.



Deep Breathing

- Get into a comfortable position.
- Place your hands on your waist.
- Take a slow, deep breath through your nose as you feel your belly expand into your hands.
- Slowly breathe out through your mouth like blowing out a candle.



Triple Flexed

- Lie down on your back on the floor.
- Put a pillow behind your head.
- Support your legs on a chair or stool.
- Rest in this position for 1 to 2 minutes.

If it's hard to get down to or up from the floor, do this in bed using pillows to support your legs.

Quadruped



- Kneel on your hands and knees on a pillow with your back straight.
- Rest in this position for 1 to 2 minutes.

If it's hard to do this on the floor, try this in bed or on a soft surface.

If you have knee pain or it is hard to get on your knees, then do the Standing Quadruped (see below).

Semi Quadruped



- Kneel in front of a chair on a pillow.
- Use your arms to support some of your body weight.
- Rest in this position for 1 to 2 minutes.

Standing Quadruped



- Place your hands on an elevated surface, such as a countertop, with your back straight.
- Use your arms to support some of your body weight.
- Rest in this position for 1 to 2 minutes.

How should I move to reduce pain with regular activities?

The following strategies can reduce pain and help you move around easier throughout the day. Ask your physical therapist or doctor if you have any questions.



Doing Laundry

- Place one hand on the edge of the washing machine for support.
- Squat down to reach the wet clothes.
- Tighten your stomach and buttock muscles.
- Pull small amounts out at a time.
- Move in front of the dryer and squat or kneel down to put the clothes in.
- Do not lean over and twist to throw the clothes into the dryer.

Squatting (can be used to unload a dryer or dishwasher)



- Place your feet shoulder-width apart or with one foot in front of the other.
- Bend your knees and slowly squat.
- Stick your rear end out as you move down.
- Keep the object close to your body.
- Only squat as far as you can without rounding your back.

Sitting

- Sit in chairs that support your back. Keep your ears in line with your hips. If needed, use a rolled-up towel or lumbar roll as a short-term strategy.
- Keep your knees level with your hips. Your feet should be flat on the floor or on a foot rest.

Sitting to Standing

- Scoot to the edge of your seat.
- Tuck your feet under your knees.
- Place your feet about shoulder-width apart.
- Keep your back straight, bending only at the hips.
- Stand by pushing with your legs, and use your arms if needed.

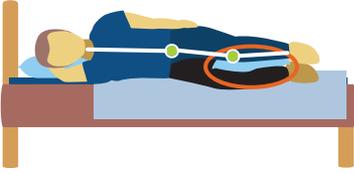


Sweeping or Vacuuming



- Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart.
- Stand in a slight squatting position, holding onto the handle.
- Keep your arms close to your body.
- Tighten your stomach and buttock muscles.
- Shift your weight from one foot to the other as you sweep or vacuum.
- Do not twist your back or bend forward.

Lying Down



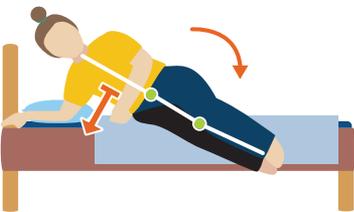
- Avoid lying on your stomach.
- When lying on your side, bend your knees and place a pillow between them.
- If you lie on your back, putting a pillow under your knees may feel better.

Getting into Bed



- Sit at the edge of the bed and place your hands on the bed.
- Gently tighten your stomach and buttock muscles.
- Slowly lower your body toward the bed with your arms as you lift your feet up.
- Lie on your side.

Getting Out of Bed



- Gently tighten your stomach and buttock muscles.
- Roll to your side, moving your hips and shoulders together.
- Move your feet slowly off the side of the bed as you push with your arms into the bed to sit up.



It can be common for back pain to return. Here are some tips to control the pain if it returns.

- **Stay active** to lessen pain and stress.
- Be mindful of your **posture** in all that you do.
- Be mindful of **moving from your hips** as you bend or come out of a chair.
- As you move, **remember to breathe** while you use your belly and buttock muscles.
- If you are in pain, using **heat or ice** on your back can be calming.

If you do not see an improvement in your pain and physical activity in 2 to 3 weeks, or if you aren't sure whether you are taking care of your back the right way, please call your doctor or health care team.

