



Low back pain - chronic

Back pain is one of the most common health complaints. Almost everyone will have back pain at some time in their life. Most of the time, the exact cause of the pain cannot be found.

Causes

One single event may not cause your pain. You may have been doing many things improperly -- such as standing or lifting -- for a long time. Then all at once, one simple movement (such as reaching for something or bending from your waist) leads to pain.

Chronic back pain may be caused by:

- Arthritis
- Extra wear and tear on the spine from work, sports, a past surgery, or injuries
- Herniated disk, where part of the spinal disk pushes on nearby nerves
- Degenerative joint or spine disease, where the spaces between the spinal nerves and spinal cord become narrowed
- Curvature of the spine, which may be passed down in families



You are at greater risk for low back pain if you:

- Are over age 30
- Are overweight
- Are pregnant
- Do not exercise
- Feel stressed or depressed
- Have a job in which you have to do a lot of heavy lifting, bending and twisting, or the job involves whole body vibration (such as truck driving or using certain tools)
- Smoke

Symptoms

You may feel some of these symptoms if you have back pain:

- Dull aching
- Sharp pain
- Tingling or burning
- Weakness in your legs or feet





Symptoms – Continued

Low back pain can differ from person to person. The pain may be mild, or it can be so severe that you are unable to move. Depending on the cause of your back pain, you may also have pain in your leg, hip, or on the bottom of your foot.

Exams and Tests

During the physical exam, the doctor will try to find the location of the pain and figure out how it affects your movement.

Other tests you have will depend on your medical history and symptoms, maybe including:

- Blood tests
- CT scan of the lower spine
- MRI scan of the lower spine
- Myelogram (an x-ray or CT scan of the spine after dye has been injected into the spinal column)
- X-ray

Treatment

If you have any symptoms that concern you, call your doctor right away.

Your back pain may not go away completely, or it may get more painful at times. Learn to take care of your back at home and how to prevent future back pain. This way you can return to your normal routine.

Your doctor and other health care staff can help you manage your pain and keep you as active as possible. Possible treatments could include one or more of the following:

- Your doctor may refer you for physical therapy. The physical therapist may try to reduce your pain using stretches and traction. The therapist will show you how to perform a Home Exercise Program (HEP). The HEP can make your back muscles stronger, so you can prevent future back pain.
- You may need a back brace to support your back at work.
- Cold packs and heat may help your back pain.
- You may also choose to see someone who performs acupuncture or someone who does spinal manipulation (a chiropractor or osteopathic doctor). Sometimes a few visits will help back pain.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy may be helpful. This technique helps you better understand your pain. It also teaches you how to manage your back pain.

NOTE! Before you make appointments for any therapy, call the Alliance to confirm the service is covered.



A number of medications can help with your back pain, possibly including:

- Over the counter drugs such as aspirin, naproxen sodium (Aleve), and ibuprofen (Advil)
- Low doses of prescribed medicines used to treat seizures or depression
- Pain medicines prescribed by your doctor called narcotics or opioids, when the pain is very severe

When severe pain does not improve with medicine, physical therapy, and other treatments, you may need an injection.

Spinal surgery is an option only if you have nerve damage, or the cause of the back pain does not heal after a long time.

Outlook

Most back problems will get better by itself. The key is to know when you need to seek medical help and when self-care measures will allow you to get better.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call your health care provider if you have constant, severe back pain. Numbness, loss of movement, weakness, or bowel or bladder changes are of special concern.

Questions? Alameda Alliance for Health is here to help.

Call Alliance Health Programs at 510-747-4577

Toll-Free: 1-877-932-2738

CRS/TTY: 711 or 1-800-735-2929

8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m., Monday-Friday

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