

Good Habits for a Healthy Back

Know Your Back Facts

Most low back pain happens when you injure the *muscles* or *ligaments* in your back. You may also feel back pain if you hurt the *nerves* or *discs* in your spine. But an injury is not the only cause of back pain. You may hurt your back if you move your body the wrong way or do things that weaken it.

Low back pain can come on suddenly. Or it can happen over time. Common causes of low back pain are:

- Sprains or strains—the ligaments or muscles of the spine are injured
- Poor posture
- Arthritis or other joint conditions
- Lack of exercise or being overweight
- Stress, anxiety, or depression

Back pain is one of the most common health problems in this country. There are things you can do to help keep your back healthy to help avoid low back pain.

Your back is made up of:

- **Discs** — “shock absorbers” found between the bony blocks of the spine
- **Ligaments** — tissues that keep your bones and joints in place
- **Nerves** — bundles of fibers (threads) that send signals between body parts
- **Spine** — The column of bone known as the vertebral column, which surrounds and protects the spinal cord

Types of Back Pain

	Why does it happen?	How long does it last?	When should I call a doctor?
Acute back pain	May be due to an injury, but not always	Comes on suddenly and lasts only a few days or weeks	If the pain is severe or you have numbness or pain down your leg
Chronic back pain	May be caused by poor back muscle strength, posture, or bending or lifting habits	More than 3 months—the pain may come and go	If the pain is severe or you have numbness or pain down your leg

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Get Back to Basics— Tips for a Healthy Back

Staying active is just one healthy habit that can help you to prevent low back pain. There are other things you can do every day. Your back will thank you.

- Lift objects safely—Do not bend at the waist when lifting. Bend your knees and keep your back straight. Hold the object close to your belly. Do not twist your body. Lift slowly
- Do not try to lift things that are too heavy for you. Ask for help
- Keep good posture when you sit, stand, and walk
- Sleep on a medium-firm mattress
- Stay at a healthy weight so you do not strain your back
- If you smoke, quit
- Eat a healthy diet. Get plenty of calcium and vitamin D to keep your bones strong
- Use your seat belt and a backrest or pillow when you drive

Talk with your health care team about ways you can help keep your back healthy.

Get moving to help your back

You use your back muscles all the time—to sit, stand, or twist your body. This is why you need to keep your back muscles strong. It can help you prevent back pain and strain. To keep your back strong and healthy, stay active by doing:

- Aerobic exercise—walking and swimming helps your muscles work better
- Stretches—to help your muscles and tissues move more freely
- Strength training—movements to strengthen your back, stomach, and leg muscles

Always talk to your health care team before starting any exercise program.

