

Getting Your Back on Track

Minor back muscle strain is often something you can take care of at home. Here's help for the pain and when to call the doctor.

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After your back is injured, you will want to learn new habits. Once you're feeling better, you can improve your posture, practice back-safe lifting techniques, start a fitness routine, and lose weight if you need to. These will all help to keep your back healthy. But before you start to use your back, it must first heal.

Ice, heat, and rest

If your back is acting up, give it a rest. Avoid any heavy lifting or other work that puts a strain on your back. Prolonged bed rest is usually not advised for back pain. In fact, bed rest longer than 1 or 2 days can weaken your back muscles and decondition you overall.

To manage back pain:

- Apply ice or heat for 10 to 15 minutes at a time. Use a thin towel or other protection around the heat or cold to prevent burning of the skin. Do not use heat or cold if you have diabetes, circulation problems, or decreased sensation unless your doctor suggests it.
- Decrease your activity for a couple of days. Avoid lifting, bending, or sitting for too long.
- If your pain doesn't get better in 48 hours, call your doctor.

Pain medications

Over-the-counter, nonprescription pain medications can help. All of the following drugs, except acetaminophen, reduce inflammation:

- **Aspirin.** Never use aspirin in anyone under the age of 19. It could cause Reye's syndrome, a very serious problem.
- **Acetaminophen.** This only reduces pain, not inflammation. It is safer for the stomach. Taking more than indicated can cause liver damage, especially with alcohol.
- **Ibuprofen.** Reduces inflammation and pain.

Note: Aspirin and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) can lead to stomach bleeding, kidney and liver problems. Always read product labels first and follow all directions. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you have questions. Check with your doctor before taking any



over-the-counter medicines if you have any health problems or take any other prescription or over-the-counter medicines or supplements.

Low-back pain emergencies

Call 9-1-1 if you have any of these warning signs along with back pain:

- Sudden onset of severe tearing or ripping pain
- Inability to move your arms or legs
- Sudden chest pain or pain across your upper back, shoulders, arms, or jaw
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness or passing out
- Severe pain following a major fall or other accident

Also seek emergency medical help if you have:

- Severe pain or sudden worsening of back pain
- New loss of bowel or bladder control
- Sudden arm or leg numbness or weakness
- Numbness in the parts of your body that would touch a saddle
- Shaking chills

SOURCES:

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. Low back pain fact sheet. Accessed: 02/14/2011

North American Spine Society. Acute low back pain. Accessed: 02/14/2011

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