

6 Self-Care Tips to Soothe Acute Back Pain

Most back pain eventually clears up on its own. But until it does, following these steps can help you feel better.

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Back pain is so common in the United States that at least four out of every five people will have a significant bout of it at some point in their lives.

Why do our backs ache so frequently? Often, the pain is triggered by an injury. For instance, you might find yourself wincing if you overstretch a muscle by lifting something too heavy or doing too much gardening. Back pain can also be brought on by medical problems, including arthritis, osteoporosis, a ruptured disk or an infection. Weight gain can also cause back pain, as can sleeping in the wrong position.



Steps to soothe a sore back

The good news is that most back pain doesn't last long. It often goes away on its own after a few days. Roughly 80 percent of back pain cases clear up nearly completely within six weeks. Until the pain disappears, these tips can help you feel better:

1. **Use ice.** As soon as possible after a back injury, apply a cold pack or a cold compress to the affected part of your back. (You can use a bag of ice or frozen vegetables wrapped in a towel.) Do this several times daily, up to 20 minutes at a time, for two to three days. If you have diabetes, impaired sensation or impaired circulation, talk with your doctor about whether you should use ice.
2. **Apply heat.** Next, use a heating pad to apply warmth to your back for brief periods of time. Don't fall asleep when you're using a heating pad, as you might burn yourself. Warm baths may also ease any lingering pain. If you have diabetes, impaired sensation or impaired circulation, talk with your doctor about whether you should use heat.
3. **Go easy on bed rest.** As painful as it may be to move, limit the time you spend in bed to no longer than one or two days. Resuming your normal activities as soon as possible can actually reduce discomfort, improve your mobility and help you avoid complications, such as weak muscles and blood clots in your legs.
4. **Sleep smart.** At night or whenever you rest, sleep on your side with a pillow between your knees.
5. **Consider medicine.** Ask your doctor about over-the-counter pain relievers.
6. **Exercise.** Back-friendly exercises such as swimming and walking may help speed your recovery. Check with your doctor before you increase your activity. Your doctor or a physical therapist may also suggest specific exercises to strengthen your back and abdominal muscles.

When should I see a doctor?

Be sure to alert your doctor if there is no noticeable reduction in your back pain after 72 hours of self-care.

Be aware that back pain can be a red flag for a potentially serious condition. Be sure to alert your doctor if you have back pain and if you have a history of cancer or significant bone disease, if your pain is worse at night or unrelated to activity or if you are age 50 or over.

See a doctor right away if you experience:

- Numbness or tingling
- Pain that gets worse or does not improve with rest or treatment
- Pain after a fall or an injury
- Pain accompanied by weakness, leg numbness, fever, trouble urinating or weight loss without dieting

Seek immediate emergency medical help if you have back pain and have:

- Had a major fall or injury
- Numbness in the groin or "saddle area" (that part of your pelvis that would be touching a saddle if you were on a horse)
- Pain that is sudden or severe
- Blood in your urine

Also, call your doctor right away if you have back pain and are pregnant, as this might be a sign of labor.

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