

Oh! My Aching Back

Low back pain is a common medical problem and injury that many people have to deal with. According to the *American Academy of Family Physicians*, anywhere from 80% to 90% of people in the United States deal with acute low back pain at some time in their lives. In fact, it is the fifth most common reason for all doctors' visits. Although low back pain may begin following strenuous physical activity or trauma – like lifting

heavy furniture or doing yard work – it is often not connected to a specific activity or incident. In most cases, back pain can be relieved by following a few simple steps.

You can prevent back pain by:

- Maintaining a healthy back
- Understanding its anatomy and risks for back pain and
- Learning how to prevent injury

There are four main regions of the spine:

Your spine is an intricate network of muscles, ligaments, discs and nerves designed to be very strong, but also flexible for movement in many different directions. Most of your body's weight is supported by the back and spinal column.

Cervical (neck) – seven vertebrae that support the weight of the head and protect the nerves that come from the brain to the rest of the body

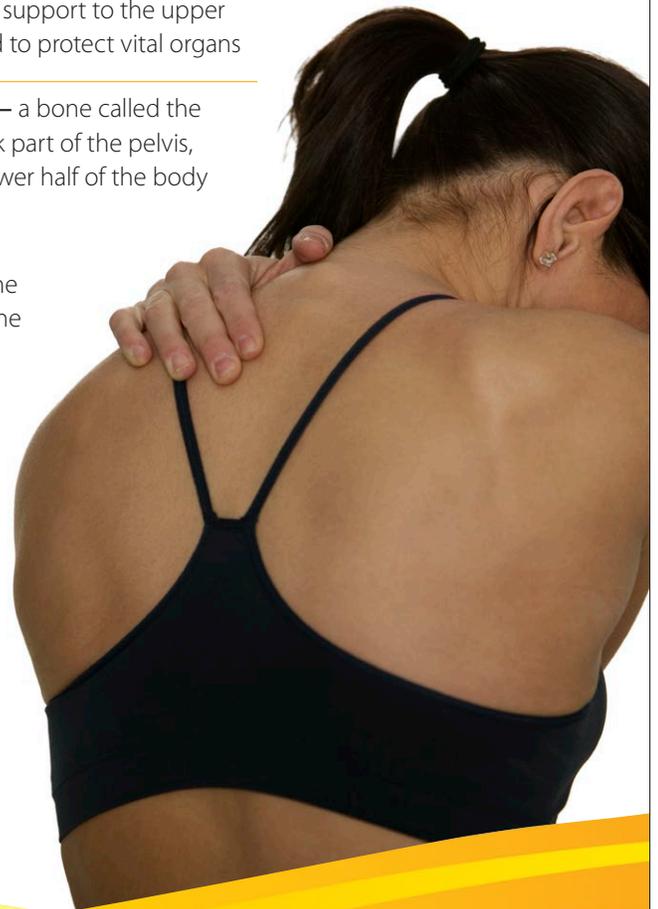
Thoracic (upper back) – twelve vertebrae that provide stability and structural support to the upper back – a strong cage designed to protect vital organs

Lumbar (lower back) – five vertebrae that carry all of the weight of the torso, making it the most frequently injured area

Sacral (bottom of the spine) – a bone called the sacrum that makes up the back part of the pelvis, connecting the spine to the lower half of the body

Defining Your Back:

- **Spinal Cord:** A thick cord of nerve tissue that comes off of the base of the brain and runs throughout the spinal column. Spinal nerves branch off the cord to various parts of the body
- **Vertebrae:** Boney building blocks of the spine, stacked on top of each other with discs in between each one
- **Muscles:** Muscles surrounding the spine help support it, as well as hold the body upright and allow the trunk of the body to move, twist and bend in many directions.
- **Discs:** The shock absorbers between vertebrae that consist of two parts: a tough outer portion made of collagen and a soft inner core of a gel-like substance



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Common causes of back pain:

- Poor posture and alignment can force the muscles and tendons to work harder than usual and create wear between the joints
- Overexertion – strenuous exercise, lifting or movement
- Traumatic back injuries from sports, falls and accidents
- Degenerative wear and tear from normal aging causes dehydration of the disc, leading to arthritis of the spine
- A bulging (slipped) or herniated (ruptured) disc occurs when the disc is protruding into the spinal canal without breaking open. Once the nucleus gel leaks out, the gel and pieces of the disc can break away in the spinal canal causing pressure and pain
- Structural abnormalities like scoliosis
- Stress

How can you prevent back pain?

- Practice good posture when seated, standing and sleeping
 - Keep a straight line all the way down from your ear to shoulder to hip to knee to ankle when standing
 - Wear flat shoes and/or alternate putting one foot up on a “step” to help take the pressure off of the spine when standing for long periods of time
 - If you are a side sleeper, place a pillow **between** your knees
 - If you sleep on your back, place a pillow **under** your knees
 - If you are a stomach sleeper, place a pillow under your stomach
- Lift properly
 - Get as close as possible to the item you’ll be lifting
 - Lift with your knees and legs, not your back
 - Keep the item as close to your body as you can when standing up
 - Pivot with your shoulders, hips and feet in the direction you need to place the item – do not twist the spine while holding a heavy load
 - If you cannot pick up the object, consider having someone help you lift it. Also, consider **pushing** the object – this is typically easier on your back than pulling a heavy load
- Reduce stress
- Lose weight, it can reduce the strain on the low back, especially if you tend to gain weight around your middle section
- Warm up and cool down to help your muscles transition from cold to warm and help prevent injury
- Regularly stretch and strengthen your back

What factors increase your risk for back pain?

- Age
- Diet
- Race
- Smoking
- Fitness
- Heredity
- Occupation



Back stretches:

- Belly Breathing
- Knee to Chest
- Hamstring Stretch
- Side Stretch
- Cat/Cow Flex
- Spinal Twists

Back strengthening exercises:

- Pelvic Tilts
- Crunches
- Back extensions (“Superman”)
- Planks
- Bridging
- Bird-Dog

While these exercises are specific to your back, it’s also important to stay active in general. Low impact exercises that are easier on your back include swimming, walking and the elliptical machine.

