Managing Low Back Pain

You are not alone. Back pain is very common and usually gets better over time without any prescription medication or diagnostic imaging (such as an X-ray, MRI, or CT scan). This guide includes some tips to help you manage your back pain at home.

For many people, back pain starts out of nowhere. The pain can be intense (very bad) and feel scary, but for most people the pain will get better within a week or two.

While you are at the Emergency Department today, your health care provider will check your back. They will give you advice, and may give you medication to help your pain.

Emergency Department health care providers can rule out serious causes of back pain for most people. They will do this by asking you questions about your symptoms and doing a physical examination.

In most cases, diagnostic imaging is not helpful to find the cause of back pain. In fact, having an unnecessary diagnostic imaging test may cause harm, and even delay your recovery.

Did you know?

- X-rays only show bone and most back pain is caused by muscles, ligaments, and other soft tissues.
- Everyone will have age-related changes to their spine show up on an MRI. There is often no relationship between your pain and these results.
- Diagnostic imaging exposes you to radiation and may lead to other unnecessary tests and procedures.

Photo Credit: Nova Scotia Health Authority
What can I do to manage my back pain?

- Keep moving. Staying in one position for too long may increase your pain. Movement and exercise, including walking, may help to reduce your pain.
- If your doctor does recommend medication, take it as directed.
- Heat and/or cold may help your pain. A bag of frozen peas makes a great cold pack. Wrap the hot or cold pack in a slightly damp towel and place it on your back, where it hurts. Only apply for 15-20 minutes at a time.
- When you are having pain, try one of these positions between periods of activity:

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<td>1.</td>
<td>Lie on your back. Put your feet on a chair or cushions with your knees bent. Move the chair/cushions closer to your body so your knees move toward your chest.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Lie on your stomach with a pillow under your hips.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Lie on your side with a pillow between your knees.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>When sitting, place a small cushion or rolled up towel in the curve of your low back for support. Make sure your knees are at a 90° angle.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>When standing, lift one foot off of the floor and place it on a low cupboard shelf or small stool.</td>
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Did you know?

- More than 80% of people will have an episode of back pain in their lifetime.
- Returning to work and normal activities as quickly as possible will help you recover faster.
- In most cases, strong pain medications (opioids) are not recommended for back pain. Your health care provider will help you find what is best for you.
- MRIs & CT scans are only appropriate for people with specific symptoms, called ‘red flags.’ Your doctor will check for red flags.
What can I do to prevent back pain?

Move around often. Avoid staying in the same position for long periods of time.

Physical activity. Regular physical activity is important to keep your back and body healthy. Choose an exercise or activity that you enjoy doing, such as walking, swimming, or yoga.

Motion is lotion. Motion works like a natural anti-inflammatory medication. It is good for your discs, muscles, and joints.

Adopt a healthier lifestyle. Reaching or keeping a healthy weight will reduce strain on your back. Quit smoking - research has found that smoking can increase your chances of developing back pain.

And remember...

If you have new back pain or a flare-up of old pain, try to avoid activities that may make it worse for 1-3 days. Staying inactive longer than that may lead to more pain and loss of function.

As you recover, there may be ups and downs. Expect to have some bad days. Bad days occur even when you don’t know why. This is normal.

Your back is strong, sturdy, and adaptable – although it may feel sensitive, it is actually hard to damage.

Treatment options

A health care professional may be able to help if your pain is severe (very bad) and does not get better. You may wish to contact someone who focuses on back or musculoskeletal problems, such as a physiotherapist, chiropractor or massage therapist.

In Nova Scotia, outpatient physiotherapy is paid for by the provincial health care system. You can get treatment at your local hospital free of charge and without a prescription. However, there may be a waiting list for this service.

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<th>Contact NSHA Physiotherapy:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nova Scotia Rehabilitation Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 902-473-1288</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dartmouth General Hospital</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 902-465-8303</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cobequid Community Health Centre</td>
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<td>• 902-869-6116</td>
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<td>Visit for a list of other locations: <a href="http://www.nshealth.ca/service-details/Physiotherapy">www.nshealth.ca/service-details/Physiotherapy</a></td>
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You can get private therapy in a local clinic or in your home by calling your local physiotherapy clinic. Often, you are able to book an appointment a day or two after you call.

You do not need a doctor’s note unless your insurance company requires it. Treatments must be paid for out-of-pocket or with private insurance. Contact your insurance company to find out what they will cover.
Contact your family health care provider if:

• You have new pain going down one or both legs.
• You have repeated episodes of back pain.
• You have back pain that is worse at night or constant at night.

Go to the nearest Emergency Department if:

• You suddenly cannot urinate (pee) or cannot control your bowel movements.
• You have numbness in your buttocks (bum) and inner thigh area (the area where the saddle of a horse would touch you).
• You have numbness or weakness in your legs that is new or gets worse.