

# Managing Low Back Pain

**You are not alone.** Back pain is very common. It usually gets better over time without prescription medication or diagnostic imaging (like an X-ray, an MRI, or a CT scan). This pamphlet has tips to help you manage your low back pain at home.

For many people, back pain starts suddenly. The pain can be very bad. You may feel scared or worried.

Pain is created by both your brain and your body. Often, the cause of pain cannot be found using tests like bloodwork or X-rays. Having diagnostic imaging that you do not need may cause harm, and even slow down your recovery.

During your Emergency Department (E.D.) visit, a health care provider will check for serious causes of back pain by:

- › Asking you questions about your symptoms
- › Doing a physical exam

They will give you advice. They may give you medication to help your pain.

For most people, the pain will start to get better in 7 to 14 days (1 to 2 weeks).



Photo Credit: Nova Scotia Health

## Did you know?

- Diagnostic imaging exposes you to radiation. It may also lead to follow-up tests and procedures that you do not need.
- X-rays only show bone. Back pain is often caused by strained muscles and ligaments. An X-ray will not show these causes of back pain.
- Your spine changes as you age. An MRI will show these changes, but most of the time these changes are not the cause of your back pain.

## What can I do to manage my back pain?

- Keep moving. Staying in one position for too long may make your pain worse. Movement and exercise (like walking) may help to lower your pain.
- If your primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner) or your E.D. health care provider recommends medication, take it as directed.
- Heat and/or cold may also help. A bag of frozen peas makes a great cold pack. Wrap the cold pack in a slightly damp (wet) towel and put it on your back, where it hurts. Use heat or cold for 15 to 20 minutes at a time.
- When you are having pain, try one of these positions:



1. Lie on your back. Put your feet on a chair or cushions with your knees bent. Move the chair or cushions closer to your body so your knees move towards your chest.



2. Lie on your stomach with a pillow under your hips.



3. Lie on your side with a pillow between your knees.



4. When sitting, put a small cushion or a rolled-up towel in the curve of your low back for support. Make sure your knees are at a 90-degree angle. You may need to put a cushion or a stool under your feet.



5. When standing, lift 1 foot off the floor and put it on a low cupboard shelf or a small stool.

## Did you know?

- More than 80% of people will have back pain in their lifetime.
- Going back to work and your regular activities as soon as possible will help you recover faster.
- In most cases, strong pain medications (like opioids) **are not** needed to treat back pain. Your health care provider will help you find what is best for you.
- MRIs and CT scans are only done when people have certain symptoms. Your health care provider will check for these symptoms.

## Treatment

If your pain is affecting your quality of life, visit a health care provider who focuses on back or **musculoskeletal** (muscle, bone, or joint) problems, like a:

- › Physiotherapist
- › Chiropractor
- › Massage therapist

In Nova Scotia, **outpatient**

(not admitted to the hospital)

physiotherapy is paid for by the provincial health care system. You can get free treatment at your local hospital **without** a prescription. There may be a waitlist.

**To access Nova Scotia Health physiotherapy services, call:**

Nova Scotia Rehabilitation Centre

- › Phone: 902-473-1288

Dartmouth General Hospital

- › Phone: 902-465-8303

Cobequid Community Health Centre

- › Phone: 902-869-6116

To see the full list of locations, visit:

- › [www.nshealth.ca/clinics-programs-and-services/physiotherapy](http://www.nshealth.ca/clinics-programs-and-services/physiotherapy)

## Local physiotherapy clinics

You can also call a local clinic to book treatment at the clinic or at your home.

Wait times are often short. Use the “Find a Physio” tool below to find a clinic:

- › [www.physiotherapyns.ca/findaphysio](http://www.physiotherapyns.ca/findaphysio)

You must pay for these treatments yourself or with private insurance (if you have it). You **do not** need a doctor’s note unless your insurance company asks for it. Contact your insurance company to find out what they will cover.

## What can I do to prevent back pain?

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

**Move around often. Do not** stay 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 an activity that you enjoy, like walking, swimming, or yoga.

## Try to keep a healthy lifestyle.

Reaching or keeping a healthy weight will lower strain on your back. Quit or cut back on smoking. Research has found that smoking can raise your chance of getting back pain.

## Remember

If you have new back pain, or if pain you had before comes back, try to avoid activities that may make the pain worse for 1 to 3 days. Avoiding these activities for longer than that may cause more pain and loss of function.

As you recover, you may have good days and bad days. It is common to have some bad days.

**Your back is strong, sturdy, and adaptable. It may feel sensitive, but it is actually hard to damage.**

## Questions for my health care provider:

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### **Contact your primary health care provider, a walk-in clinic, or a mobile clinic, if:**

- You have new pain going down 1 or both of your legs
- You have repeated episodes of back pain
- You have back pain that is worse at night or lasts all night
- You have new back pain and a fever (temperature above 38 °C or 100.4 °F)

### **Go to the nearest Emergency Department right away if:**

- You suddenly cannot urinate (pee) or cannot control your bowel movements (poops)
- You have numbness in your buttocks (bum) and inner thigh (top part of your leg) area
- You have numbness or weakness in your legs that is new or gets worse
- You have mid-back pain and have osteoporosis

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:  
[www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources](http://www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources)

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:  
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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