

Managing Low Back Pain

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

For many people, back pain comes on suddenly. The pain can be very bad. You may feel scared or worried. For most people, the pain will start to get better in 1 to 2 weeks.

During your Emergency Department visit, the health care provider will check your back. They will give you advice. They 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 exam.

Pain is complex. It is created by both our brains and our bodies. Often, the cause of pain cannot be found by tests like bloodwork or X-rays. Unneeded diagnostic imaging may cause harm, and even slow down your recovery.



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 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, including walking, may help lower your pain.
- If your primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner) or Emergency Department health care provider recommends 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 cold pack in a slightly damp towel and place it on your back, where it hurts. Apply 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/cushions closer to your body so your knees move toward 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, 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 degree angle. You may need to put a cushion or stool under your feet.



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

Did you know?

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

Treatment

If your pain is affecting your quality of life, contact someone who focuses on back or musculoskeletal (muscle, bone, or joint) problems, like a physiotherapist, a chiropractor, or a 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. There may be a waiting list for this service.

Physiotherapy Services at Nova Scotia Health

Nova Scotia Rehabilitation Centre

› Phone: 902-473-1288

Dartmouth General Hospital

› Phone: 902-465-8303

Cobequid Community Health Centre

› Phone: 902-869-6116

For a list of other locations, visit:

www.nshealth.ca/service-details/Physiotherapy

You can book physiotherapy 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.

› www.physiotherapyns.ca/findaphysio

You do not need a doctor's note unless your insurance company asks for it. You must pay for treatments out-of-pocket or with private insurance. 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 your discs, muscles, and joints.

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 activity that you enjoy, like walking, swimming, or yoga.

Aim for a healthy lifestyle. Reaching or keeping a healthy weight will reduce (lower) strain on your back. Quit or cut back on smoking. Research has found that smoking can increase your chances of getting back pain.

Remember

If you have new back pain or older pain returns, 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, there may be good days and bad days. It is common to have some bad days.

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

Questions for my health care provider:

Contact your primary health care provider, a walk-in clinic, or a mobile clinic, 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 lasts all night.
- You have new back pain and a fever (temperature above 38^o C/100.4^o F).

Go to the nearest Emergency Department if:

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

Looking for more health information?

Find this pamphlet and all our patient resources here: <https://library.nshealth.ca/PatientEducation>

Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.

For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

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

Learn about other programs and services in your community: call 211 or visit <http://ns.211.ca>

Nova Scotia Health promotes a smoke-free, vape-free, and scent-free environment.

Please do not use perfumed products. Thank you!

www.nshealth.ca

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The information is not intended to be and does not constitute health care or medical advice.

If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.