

Learning About Relief for Back Pain



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What is back tension and strain?

Back strain happens when you overstretch or pull a muscle in your back. You may hurt your back from falling, exercising or lifting something.

Most back pain will get better with rest and time. You can take care of yourself at home to help your back heal.

What can you do first to relieve back pain?

When you first feel back pain, try these steps:

- **Walk.** Take a short walk (10 to 20 minutes) on a level surface (no slopes, hills, or stairs) every 2 to 3 hours. Walk only distances you can manage without pain, especially leg pain.
- **Relax.** Find a comfortable position for rest. For example, some people are comfortable on the floor, while others may prefer a medium-firm bed with a small pillow under their head and another under their knees. Some people prefer to lie on their side with a pillow between their knees. Whatever works for you, make sure you don't stay in one position for too long.
- **Try heat or ice.** Try using a heating pad on a low or medium setting, or a warm shower, for 15 to 20 minutes every 2 to 3 hours. Alternatively, you can buy single-use heat wraps that last up to 8 hours. For cooling, try an ice pack for 10 to 15 minutes every 2 to 3 hours. You can use an ice pack or a bag of frozen vegetables wrapped in a thin towel. There is not strong evidence that either heat or ice will help, but you can try them to see if they ease the pain. You may also want to try switching between heat and cold.
- **Take pain medicine exactly as directed.**
 - If the doctor gave you a prescription medicine for pain, take it as prescribed.
 - If you are not taking a prescription pain medicine, ask your doctor if you can take an over-the-counter medicine.

What else can you do?

- **Stretch and exercise.** Exercises that increase flexibility may relieve your pain and make it easier for your muscles to keep your spine in a good, neutral position.
- **Do self-massage.** You can use self-massage to unwind after work or school or to energize yourself in the morning. You can easily massage your feet, hands or neck. Self-massage works best if you are in comfortable clothes and are sitting or lying in a comfortable position. Use oil or lotion to massage bare skin.
- **Reduce stress.** Back pain can lead to a vicious circle: Distress about the pain tenses the muscles in your back, which in turn causes more pain. Learn how to relax your mind and your muscles to lower your stress.

For 24/7 nurse advice and general health information, call Health Link at 811.

Current as of: September 20, 2018

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