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Back Pain: Prevention is the Key

Simple muscle strain accounts for most back pain, but arthritis and osteoporosis are also culprits. Strike a balance between rest and exercise.

A new survey by the North American Spine Society shows that 80 percent of adults experience back pain at some point in their lives. According to Bruce Ferrell, MD, Associate Professor in the Division of Geriatrics at the UCLA School of Medicine, back pain is “the most common source of musculoskeletal pain in older people.” While it has many different causes, most back pain has two important characteristics: 1) it can be treated without surgery, and 2) it can be prevented.

Most back pain results from strains to the muscles or ligaments in the lower back, which supports the weight of the upper body. Strains can be caused by repeating the same motion again and again, from sitting for long periods with poor posture, from twisting or stretching in unaccustomed ways, or from lifting. Most strains get better with home treatments of over-the-counter anti-inflammatories and applications of ice or heat. While you'll want to rest when your back hurts, it's important not to languish in bed, as the lack of mobility can worsen your pain

and make it harder to regain flexibility. You should return to your usual activities as your pain permits. “Whatever you can tolerate is fine,” says Dr. Ferrell.

“If it hurts, don't do it. Otherwise, if it doesn't hurt, you can do anything that you want to do.”

Dr. Ferrell says that the vast majority of back strains improve within a few weeks, although lesser amounts of pain may be experienced for up to six weeks. He stresses, however, that “if you have severe pain that persists longer than two weeks, you really ought to see the doctor,” because it can be a sign of a more serious condition.

Further episodes of back strain can be avoided with attention to correct posture and exercises that strengthen the back and abdomen. See your doctor or a physical therapist to learn which exercises to do, and to be sure it's safe for you to add them to your routine. According to Dr. Ferrell, “If you do them every day, then they are good prevention, and they really do help.”

Less commonly, back pain results from conditions that put pressure on the spinal cord or the nerves radiating from it.

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Pain from muscle strain or spasm can last for weeks. Often it must simply be waited out, with the help of over-the-counter anti-inflammatories and hot or cold compresses. Episodes like this will convince you to keep your back in shape all the time.

Back Pain ... *from page 1*

Osteoarthritis, which can cause abnormal bony growths in the spine, is the most common cause of this kind of back pain in older adults. If a nerve is constricted by bone, the pain can be severe. “You need to see your doctor about pains that go down your leg or that radiate around in the abdomen, because it may mean that there is encroachment on the nerves,” says Dr. Ferrell.

Treatments for bony growths on the spine are limited. “If there’s a mild amount of irritation in the nerve root where it exits the spinal canal, epidural injections of steroids decrease the inflammation. It can then get better for a good deal of time, sometimes months or years.” More severe bone overgrowths can be operated on to enlarge the tunnels through which nerves pass. While this is not a cure—since abnormal bone growth will continue—it relieves pressure on the nerves. “But,” says Dr. Ferrell, “it doesn’t always relieve the pain. That’s the reason surgery is the last resort.”

Although arthritis cannot be prevented, exercise during its early stages can help maintain strength and flexibility, thereby reducing pain and preserving mobility. Again, ask your doctor for a referral to a physical therapist, and for the go-ahead to begin exercising.

Another cause of back pain

is osteoporosis, a weakening of bones associated with aging that can cause vertebrae to fracture. Some people experience fractures and never feel pain; some feel severe pain, especially when the broken vertebrae press on nearby nerves. As painful as it may be, the treatment is usually rest and pain relief, because “it gets better in about two to three weeks, and then is usually pretty much gone by the end of six weeks,” says Dr. Ferrell. He stresses the importance of prevention: If osteoporosis is diagnosed early, its progress can be halted with good nutrition, weight-bearing exercise like walking, calcium supplements, and prescription drugs—all of which increase bone density and reduce the risk of a vertebral fracture.

Although most back pain doesn’t result in serious complications, there are some circumstances that you should treat as an emergency. See your doctor immediately if:

- Your back pain is accompanied by chest pain, shortness of breath, nausea or vomiting, dizziness, or pain radiating to the neck, arms, or abdomen. These may be symptoms of a problem unrelated to your spine.

- Your back pain is accompanied by loss of bladder or bowel control. This can be a sign of pressure on the nerves to the intestines and bladder, a serious condition that requires immediate

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you have temporary back pain:

- Reduce activities that cause pain; give your back time to rest and heal, but don’t stay long in bed. Stick with other activities that aren’t painful.
- Apply ice (for 20 minutes at a time) or heat—whichever gives you relief.
- Use a non-prescription anti-inflammatory like aspirin or ibuprofen.
- Gradually return to your usual activities.
- See your doctor for severe pain lasting more than two weeks.

To prevent back pain:

- Learn how to maintain proper posture while sitting, standing, and lifting.
- Ask your doctor about strengthening exercises for your back and abdomen.
- Maintain a healthy body weight.
- Prevent osteoporosis by eating calcium-rich foods, and consider taking supplements of calcium and vitamin D.
- Exercise regularly. (Check with your doctor first.)



medical attention to prevent long-term damage.

In short, most back strains get better on their own, but can be avoided by strengthening the muscles that support the lower back. Back pain from arthritis can be treated with anti-inflammatories; surgery is performed only when a nerve or the spinal cord is being compressed. Back pain from osteoporosis can be prevented with early diagnosis and a healthy lifestyle. ■

This is one of several good back-relieving stretches that your doctor might approve (if your knees are willing). A chair, low table, or bed may be used for support.

