

# Acute Low Back Pain

At some point in their lives, most people experience low back pain that lasts for less than 12 weeks. Fortunately, most people with acute low back pain get better within 2 weeks.

You play an important role in managing your back pain. Our clinicians partner with you to provide quality back care and help you lead a healthy, active life.

## What causes acute low back pain?

The cause of acute low back pain often is difficult to determine. Low back pain usually is not caused by damage to your spine. Only rarely is low back pain caused by infections or other serious problems.

## What tests are needed to diagnose and treat low back pain?

Your clinician can create a plan to treat your back pain by doing a physical exam and asking about your medical history. X-rays and MRIs usually are not helpful when you first develop low back pain. Generally, these tests cannot determine the cause of your low back pain and will not change how your back pain is treated. Your clinician will work with you to schedule an X-ray or MRI if needed.

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

Normally it takes a few days or even a couple of weeks to feel better. During this healing time, you may worry about hurting your back even more, or you may just want quick relief. Follow the low back recovery action plan you and your clinician developed together to manage your pain. Your action plan will likely work if you stay with it.

## Be active

Usually when you are in pain, you might avoid activity. However, when you have low back pain, staying in bed can be harmful. Prolonged inactivity may increase stiffness and pain. Returning to work or usual daily activity in a few days or less is important to your recovery. While you can expect some discomfort, getting back to regular activities helps prevent your back from becoming weak and stiff.

To help in your recovery and to prevent further back problems, keep yourself active.

- ♦ Follow the exercise plan in your action plan.
- ♦ Gradually increase your daily activities as long as they are not significantly increasing your pain.
- ♦ Avoid lifting heavy objects.
- ♦ Avoid repetitive bending and twisting if these movements cause sharp or shooting pain.

## Use heat

Take a hot bath (no greater than 100°F or 38°C) or place a heating pad on your lower back for 20 minutes 3 to 4 times a day to reduce pain in your lower back.

## Take medications

**Over-the-counter medications.** Over-the-counter (OTC) pain medications can safely and effectively manage acute back pain. Talk to your clinician about the following options.

- ♦ Anti-inflammatory medications, such as ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) or aspirin, can help ease lower back pain. Do not use anti-inflammatory medications if you have kidney or stomach problems.
- ♦ Acetaminophen (Tylenol) can help with pain relief and can be used if anti-inflammatory medication upsets your stomach. Do not use acetaminophen if you have liver disease or have 3 or more drinks per day.

**Muscle relaxants.** Your clinician also may prescribe muscle relaxants during the first few days to ease muscle spasms. Muscle relaxants often cause drowsiness. Do not drive when taking these medications.

**Opioids.** Stronger pain medications, such as opioids (morphine, hydromorphone and oxycodone), usually are not needed to manage low back pain. These medications have many side effects. They may make your back pain more difficult to treat and worse over time. If these medications are needed, generally they are prescribed for a short time (less than 2 weeks).

## Manage everyday stress

Stress is a normal part of life. Sometimes, family, work and financial pressure can add extra stress. Too much stress can make your back pain worse. Find ways to manage stress.

- ♦ Try relaxation techniques, such as listening to music, practicing yoga or meditating.
- ♦ Talk to family and friends.
- ♦ Find the positive, and do not dwell on the negative.

## How can a physical therapist or a chiropractor help?

A physical therapist or a chiropractor may use a “hands-on” approach to move your back and help you improve your activity level. You will learn exercises to increase strength or flexibility. Park Nicollet Health Services offers both physical therapy and chiropractic therapy for your convenience.

## What alternative therapies can help?

Some people may find alternative therapies helpful. These therapies include acupuncture, massage, therapeutic massage and yoga. Scientists are studying these therapies to learn more about how they can be used to treat low back pain. Your insurance company may pay for these services. Visit [nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/backpain.html](http://nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/backpain.html) for more information from the National Institutes of Health.

## When should I call my clinician?

### Call your clinician if you have any of the following symptoms:

- ♦ Back pain that does not go away after 6 weeks or continues to worsen
- ♦ Weight loss for no obvious reason
- ♦ New weakness in 1 leg
- ♦ Numbness that does not improve

### Go to the emergency center or call 911 if you have any of the following symptoms:

- ♦ Fever greater than 100.4°F (38°C) with back pain
- ♦ Inability to urinate
- ♦ Uncontrolled bowel movements
- ♦ New weakness in both legs