Low back pain - acute

Definition

Low back pain refers to a shooting or stabbing pain felt in your lower back. You may also have back stiffness, decreased movement of the lower back, and difficulty standing straight.

Acute back pain lasts from a few days to a few weeks.

Causes

If you are like most people, you will have at least one backache in your life. While such pain or discomfort can happen anywhere in your back, the most common area affected is your low back. This is because the low back supports most of your body's weight.

Low back pain is the number two reason that Americans see their doctor -- second only to colds and flus. Many back-related injuries happen at work. But you can change that. There are many things you can do to lower your chances of getting back pain.

You'll usually first feel back pain just after you lift a heavy object, move suddenly, sit in one position for a long time, or have an injury or accident. But before that injury or accident, the structures in your back were losing strength or changing.

Acute low back pain is most often caused by a sudden injury to the muscles, ligaments, bones, and nerves in the spine. The source of the pain may be:

- Compression fractures to the spine from osteoporosis
- Muscle spasm (very tense muscles that remain contracted)
- Ruptured or herniated disk
- Spinal stenosis (narrowing of the spinal canal)
- Spine curvatures (like scoliosis or kyphosis), which may be inherited and seen in children or teens
- Strain or tears to the muscles or ligaments supporting the back

Back pain may also be due to:

- An abnormal aortic aneurysm that is leaking
- Arthritis conditions, such as osteoarthritis, psoriatic arthritis, and rheumatoid arthritis
- Cancer that involves the spine
- Fibromyalgia
- Infection of the spine (osteomyelitis, diskitis, abscess)
- Kidney infection or kidney stones
- Problems related to pregnancy
- Medical conditions that affect the female reproductive organs, including endometriosis, ovarian cysts, ovarian cancer, or uterine fibroids

Symptoms

You may feel a variety of symptoms if you've hurt your back. You may have a tingling or burning sensation, a dull achy feeling, or sharp pain. Depending on the cause, you also may have weakness in your legs or feet.

Low back pain can vary widely. The pain may be mild, or it can be so severe that you are unable to move.

Depending on the cause of your back pain, you may also have pain in your leg, hip, or bottom of your foot.
Treatment

To get better quickly, take the right steps when you first get pain.

Here are some tips for how to handle pain early on:

- Stop normal physical activity for the first few days. This helps calm your symptoms and reduce inflammation.
- Apply heat or ice to the painful area. Try ice for the first 48-72 hours, then use heat.
- Take over-the-counter pain relievers such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB) or acetaminophen (Tylenol).
- While sleeping, try lying in a curled-up, fetal position with a pillow between your legs. If you usually sleep on your back, place a pillow or rolled towel under your knees to relieve pressure.

A common misbelief about back pain is that you need to rest and avoid activity for a long time. In fact, **bed rest is NOT recommended**.

You may want to reduce your activity only for the first couple of days. Then, slowly start your usual activities after that. Do not perform activities that involve heavy lifting or twisting of your back for the first 6 weeks after the pain begins. After 2 - 3 weeks, you should gradually resume exercise.

- Begin with light cardiovascular training. Walking, riding a stationary bicycle, and swimming are great examples. Such aerobic activities can help blood flow to your back and promote healing. They also strengthen muscles in your stomach and back.
- Stretching and strengthening exercises are important in the long run. However, starting these exercises too soon after an injury can make your pain worse. A physical therapist can help you determine when to begin stretching and strengthening exercises and how to do so.

**AVOID** the following exercises during initial recovery unless your doctor or physical therapist says it is okay:

- Ballet
- Football
- Golf
- Jogging
- Leg lifts when lying on your stomach
- Sit-ups with straight legs (rather than bent knees)
- Weight lifting

Outlook (Prognosis)

Many people will feel better within 1 week after the start of back pain. After another 4 - 6 weeks, the back pain will likely be completely gone.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call your doctor right away if you have:

- Back pain after a severe blow or fall
- Burning with urination or blood in your urine
- History of cancer
- Loss of control over urine or stool (incontinence)
- Pain traveling down your legs below the knee
• Pain that is worse when you lie down or that wakes you up at night
• Redness or swelling on the back or spine
• Severe pain that does not allow you to get comfortable
• Unexplained fever with back pain
• Weakness or numbness in your buttocks, thigh, leg, or pelvis

Also call if:

• You have been losing weight unintentionally
• You use steroids or intravenous drugs.
• You have had back pain before, but this episode is different and feels worse.
• This episode of back pain has lasted longer than 4 weeks.

For more information, visit the Franciscan Health Library at www.FHSHealth.org/Health_Education.aspx