

Lower Back Pain

Back pain is one of the most common reasons people visit the health care provider. The good news is that the pain often goes away on its own, and people usually recover in a week or two. Many people want to stay in bed when their back hurts. Current studies recommend no bed rest at all and stress that staying in bed longer than 48 hours not only won't help but it may, in fact, actually delay your recovery.

STAYING IN BED WON'T HELP YOU GET BETTER FASTER.

Research suggests that that moderating your activities and staying active in a limited way is a more effective way to control your symptoms. If you can find comfortable positions and keep moving, you may not need bed rest at all.

Research has shown that:

- + Lying down longer than a day or two day isn't helpful for relieving back pain.
- + People can recover more quickly without any bed rest.
- + The sooner you start moving, even a little bit, or return to activities such as walking, the faster you are likely to improve.

Long bed rest can lead to slower recovery.

Staying in bed for any prolonged period can increase pain. When you don't move, you lose muscle strength and flexibility. With bed rest,

you can lose 20% to 30% of your muscle strength in a week. It becomes more difficult to return to any activity. As you become weaker and stiffer your recovery takes longer.

Who needs bed rest?

Almost no one! The only people who might require time in bed are those with spinal fractures awaiting surgery.

HOW TO CARE FOR YOURSELF AT HOME

- + **What can I do for the pain?** Hot or cold packs often help. Some people can get pain relief from over-the-counter analgesics like acetaminophen or anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) or naproxen (Aleve). Ask your pharmacist how to take them and no medication should be taken for an extended period of time. Consult your nurse practitioner or physician.
- + **Manage back pain with regular exercise and professional help as required.** If you have an attack of lower-back pain that is severe, continuous and not improving, assessment and treatment by a health care professional who focuses on the back or other musculoskeletal problems may help. These practitioners may use both active and passive techniques to help you feel better. Examples of passive techniques that may be used to get you moving include:

Lower Back Pain - Continued

- Heat or ice.
- Ultrasound.
- Manipulation (massage and movement).

An active approach, like walking or water aerobics is usually the most effective. Exercise is often the best way to relieve lowerback pain. Check with your health care provider before starting an exercise program.

- + **Work with an expert.** It may help to work with someone who can explain which activities are right for you—a medical professional such as a physiotherapist or chiropractor—or an exercise expert such as a kinesiologist, registered massage therapist, informed personal trainer, yoga instructor.
- + **Choose exercises you enjoy.** Many activities can help relieve back pain. Try to include activities that strengthen the muscles around your core or trunk, your abdominal muscles as well as those in your lower back. Studies show the following activities help relieve back pain:
 - Lifting light weights.
 - Yoga.
 - Walking and using a treadmill.
 - Water aerobics.
- + **Don't cause more pain.** Avoid exercises that flare up your back pain. But just because you may have back pain with some activities doesn't mean you have done any harm. As you begin, avoid sit-ups with straight legs, leg lifts while lying on your back and shoulder presses or bicep curls while standing. Once you start to improve you can add more complex exercises to strengthen your back and all your core muscles.
- + **Join an exercise program for people with chronic back pain.** It might be easier to stick with exercise if you don't "go it alone".

WHEN TO GET HELP

Go to the nearest Emergency Department if you are experiencing any of the following:

- + You have severe continuous back pain that is not improving within 48 hours.
- + You have severe back pain and fever.
- + You have back pain with accompanying pain, numbness or weakness in one or both legs or feet. Your leg symptoms are more disabling than your back symptoms.
- + You have back pain and the onset of numbness in your private/genital region or changes in your ability to control your bladder and bowel function.

TO LEARN MORE ASK

- + Your family doctor or nurse practitioner.
- + Your physiotherapist.
- + HealthLinkBC - call 8-1-1 (7-1-1 for deaf or hard of hearing) or go online to www.HealthLinkBC.ca

RECOMMENDED FOLLOW UP

- Follow up with your primary care provider in ___ days (typically 1-2 weeks).

Reproduced with permission from Choosing Wisely Canada.

Find this information sheet on the BC Emergency Medicine Network website:

www.bcemn.ca/clinical_resource/lower-back-pain/