

# Low Back Pain: What Patients Need to Know

Low back pain is one of the most common conditions in the U.S., affecting approximately 80% of adults. Low back pain ranges in intensity, frequency and duration, and may include leg pain and other symptoms as well.



## Types of Low Back Pain

- **Axial low back pain**, the most common type of back pain, is confined to the lower back only and does not travel into the buttocks or legs. The pain usually worsens with certain activities (such as sports) or physical positions (such as sitting for long periods) and is relieved by rest.
- **Lumbar radiculopathy (sciatica)** is the second most common type of back pain. Caused by conditions that compress the nerve roots of the sciatic nerve, the pain is frequently more severe in the leg than in the back. Pain or weakness is only felt on one side and can affect the buttock, leg and foot.
- **Low back pain with referred pain** is pain in the lower back that also radiates to the groin, buttock and upper thigh, but rarely below the knee. Patients describe the pain as dull and achy, often deep inside the leg with varying intensities. Low back pain with referred pain is similar to axial pain, but often includes leg symptoms.

## Diagnosis

In many cases, a specific diagnosis of the cause of pain is sometimes not easy to clearly identify as many of the potentially painful low back structures share similar symptoms. However, a clear understanding of the patient's history, obtaining the results from a few clinical tests and identifying the type or category of back pain (described above) often is enough for a specialist to recommend treatment.

When pain persists, a specific diagnosis becomes more important. Additional diagnostic tools, including imaging tests, such as an MRI and CT-myelogram, can help determine a diagnosis.

Experienced spine professionals understand that low back pain is unique for each patient. Two patients with the same condition may experience pain differently, causing minor irritation to one while incapacitating another.

## Common Causes and Symptoms of Low Back Pain

- **Muscle and ligament strains and sprains:** Lifting a heavy object, twisting, or a sudden movement can cause muscles or ligaments to stretch or tear. The pain is usually localized (axial) and can be so severe that the patient is unable to walk or stand.
- **Lumbar disc herniation:** A herniated disc in the lower spine puts direct pressure on the nerve roots that make up the sciatic nerve, causing pain to radiate into the buttocks, leg and foot (sciatica).
- **Degenerative disc disease:** Even in young adults, spinal discs may begin to degenerate. While some people never feel symptoms, others experience chronic, fluctuating low back pain that worsens with certain positions or activities.
- **Osteoarthritis:** Facet joint osteoarthritis is a gradual breakdown of the cartilage that serves as a cushion between the facet joints in the spine. Friction between the facet joints causes inflammation, triggering pain and stiffness.
- **Spinal stenosis:** Some conditions, including facet joint osteoarthritis, cause bone spurs to form on the facet joints. When the bone spurs press on the sciatic nerve roots, they cause pain and numbness that can affect the buttocks, leg and foot.

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# Treatment Options for Low Back Pain

Treatment for lower back pain depends upon the patient's history and the type and severity of pain. The vast majority of lower back pain cases get better within six weeks and with nonsurgical treatment.

## **Rest**

Resting for 1 to 2 days allows injured muscles, ligaments and even nerve roots to begin healing. However, rest for more than a few days can lead to muscle atrophy, which can worsen low back pain because the weakened muscles do not adequately support the spine.

## **Heat/Ice**

Heat and ice packs help relieve most types of low back pain, particularly in more acute cases. Usually ice or heat is applied for approximately 20 minutes and repeated every 1 – 2 hours. Most people use ice first, but some people find more relief with heat. The two may be alternated which functions like a "pump" to remove swelling.

## **Medications**

Over-the-counter or prescription medications may be helpful in relief of lower back pain. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) or oral steroids reduce inflammation, which is often a cause of pain.

## **Chiropractic Manipulation**

Chiropractic manual manipulation focuses on improving spinal function to increase spinal range of motion, decrease pain and inflammation, and improve overall physical functioning.

- Chiropractic manipulation typically involves a controlled, sudden force applied to a spinal segment to normalize motion and improve function. Adjustments may be performed using high-velocity or low-velocity techniques.
- Reducing joint restriction and restoring function allows the local inflammation and pain reflex responses to begin to subside.
- In some cases, an accompanying, audible release of gas (joint cavitation or cracking) that is caused by the release of oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide, may be heard. This is a phenomenon and has no known physiological effect, but signifies that pressure was released from the joint.
- A relieving sensation is usually perceived. Less frequently, minor discomfort may occur (that usually resolves within a few hours) if the surrounding muscles are in spasm or tense.

## **Physical Therapy, Exercise and Stretching**

A central component of almost any lower back pain treatment plan includes aerobic conditioning, stretching and strengthening, which builds stronger support for the spine to help prevent future episodes of back pain.

## **Other Possible Treatments**

Chiropractors may employ the use of other therapies including ultrasound, electrotherapy/TENS, acupuncture, various forms of traction, massage therapy and other techniques, depending on the chiropractors training and the specific cause of the low back pain.

## **Beyond Chiropractic Care**

As appropriate, a chiropractor may refer a patient to other healthcare professionals as part of the patient's treatment plan, such as a physical therapist, physiatrist, pain management physician or spine surgeon. For example, if the pain is severe or has not improved within a reasonable time frame, a chiropractor may refer the patient for an epidural steroid injection or a surgery consult.

