

What to look for

- persistent aching or stiffness anywhere along your spine, from the base of the neck to the hips.
- sharp, localised pain in the neck, upper back, or lower back, especially after lifting heavy objects or engaging in other strenuous activity.
- chronic ache in the middle or lower back,

Back aches are a major health issue in the community today.

The spine supports our upper body and is the pivot for all movement. The spinal column is an extraordinary mechanism, providing the stability we use to stand upright and the flexibility we need for active movement. The spine, or backbone, is actually a miraculous piece of machinery consisting of 33 vertebrae (24 of them flexible) with shock absorbing pads in between them.

A healthy spine is S-shaped when viewed from the side, curving back at the shoulders and inward at the neck and small of the back. As well as being the body's main structural member, it houses the spinal cord. The intricate sensory network that runs through the vertebrae to transmit feeling and control movement throughout the entire body.

Causes

Back pain is caused by inflammation of the joints, or the bruising of muscles and ligaments by some means. More commonly thought, back problems are related to posture. Problems can occur when we stand in a slumped position, or sit hunched or sleep on a too soft mattress. Being overweight magnifies back problems.

Backache can also be due to a physical defect in the spinal column or as the result of another disease or condition in some other part of the body. It can even be psychological.

Most of our back troubles happen because of bad habits, generally developed over a long period of time...

- Poor posture;
- Overexertion in work and play;
- Sitting incorrectly at the desk or the steering wheel;
- Pushing, pulling, and lifting things carelessly.

Sometimes the effects are immediate, but in many cases back problems develop over time.

One of the most common types of back pain comes from straining the bands of muscles surrounding the spine. Although such strains can occur anywhere along the spine, they happen most often in the curve of the lower back.

The majority of the population today is more sedentary than our ancestors used to be, a high proportion of people spend the better part of their working day sitting at desks, at work stations, or in cars and trucks. These recent changes in human behaviour have had a profound and largely negative impact on human physiology.

People who walk a lot or do physical labour develop good muscle tone in their backs and legs. People who sit most of the day lose that muscle tone, and their backs are the first place to show it. However this can be improved significantly by starting exercise programs to strengthen the back muscles.

Lumbago

The most common form of backache is lumbago. It can occur quite suddenly or develop over hours or even days and is caused by lifting or twisting, following an injury or over use or there may not be any apparent reason for the pain. The result is a tearing of the ligaments an inflammation of the joints between the vertebrae.

Slipped Disc

The disc are pads of tissue situated between each of the vertebrae which make up the spine. Each disc is made up of a tough, fibrous outer layer and a softer, jelly-like inner layer called the nucleus.

A slipped disc simply means that the tough outer layer cracks open and the softer inner layer protrudes out through the crack. The disc protrusion happens where the outer layer of the disc is weakest, (usually just in front of the nerve roots which emerge from the spinal cord at each vertebrae level).

If the person has a slightly narrow spinal canal, the protruding disc material presses on the nerve root at that level and causes the symptoms of a slipped disc. Most affected discs are in the lower back region.

When the disc presses on a nerve root, symptoms occur in the area that the nerve root supplies.

Symptoms in the back include a severe backache, painful muscle spasms with more pain when moving and relief when lying flat.

Wear and Tear

Spinal discs can be subject to normal wear and tear and can actually wear away. This is very painful and disabling. This is usually a result of normal aging processes.

Disease

Cancer of the vertebrae is very rare, but it can spread to bones from other sites in the body. This disease is extremely serious and makes the patient feel very run down and unwell and should be confirmed by an X-ray or bone scan.

Sometimes, however, backache occurs for no apparent reason. Weak muscles can cause back pain as muscles cannot stand normal lifting and general movement. Stress or tension can also aggravate the pain. A condition called fibrositis causes chronic backache from localised muscle tension, which may in turn be psychosomatic in origin. Whatever the reason, the pain is still horrible.

Pregnancy commonly brings on back pain, as do injuries from physical sports, accidents, and falls.

Traditional Treatment

When you visit your doctor he or she will want to know if the back pain is associated with any other problems such as abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting etc. Doctors usually test your range of mobility to identify the type of back problem you have. Blood and urine tests will make sure the pain is not due to an infection or other systemic problem. X-rays are used in pinpointing broken bones or other skeletal defects, and can sometimes help locate problems in connective tissue.

It is important to rest, relieve the pain and slowly restore mobility and any treatment that is undertaken will focus on these stages.

The basic treatment for relieving back pain from strain or minor injury is immediate bed rest with an ice pack and a pain reliever or another non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug to reduce pain and inflammation. After the inflammation subsides, applying heat can soothe and restore muscles.

Continuous bed rest can actually do more harm than good as a program of regular exercises is needed to keep the back muscles working. Physiotherapists can help in this area and also give advice as to which exercises are appropriate for each individual case. A chiropractor can help manipulate the back. Bed rest and pain killers are the best remedy for patients with slipped discs.

Alternative/Natural Treatments

Natural therapies have been successful in aiding patients with back problems.

- **Body Work** - massage by a trained professional. Yoga may also help.
- **Herbal Therapies** - Angelica Root. For general pain relief, drink infusions of white willow (*Salix alba*) or vervain (*Verbena officinalis*). For inflammation, try teas - lobelia (*Lobelia inflata*), yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), cramp (*Viburnum opulus*), or white willow. Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*), available as a tincture and in capsules, is particularly recommended as a muscle relaxant and sedative
- **Homoeopathy** - Over-the-counter remedies that are usually very helpful are Arnica for bruised or sore muscles, Bryonia and Rhus toxicodendron for sharp pain that gets worse when you move, and Nux vomica for persistent backache.

Prevention

- Practicing good posture
- Exercise regularly - swimming especially
- Don't stay in the one position for too long. Stand up and stretch after you have been sitting for a while or crouch for a few moments if you have been reaching up.
- lift correctly with your legs, not your back. Do not bend at the waist to lift.
- Support your lower back when sitting. Buy a special cushion if necessary, particularly for driving
- Try and sleep on your side - ensure you have a firm mattress.

Dietary Considerations

Eat more fresh fruit and vegetables, wholemeal bread, pasta, brown rice low fat dairy food. Fish and plenty of filtered water.

Call Your Doctor If

- you feel numbness, tingling, or loss of control in your arms or legs;
- the pain in your back extends downward along the back of the leg;
- the pain increases when you cough or bend forward at the waist;
- the pain is accompanied by fever; you may have a bacterial infection.
- you have dull pain in one area of your spine when lying in or getting out of bed

- The muscle starts to spasm and throb