

# Back pain causes and treatment

## Back pain

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Back pain is common and usually improves within a few weeks or months.

Pain in the lower back is very common. But you can feel back pain anywhere along your spine, from your neck down to your hips.

In most cases, the pain is not caused by anything serious and will get better over time.

## How to relieve back pain

To help reduce your back pain and speed up your recovery:

- [stay as active as possible](#)
- try to continue activities as normal - too much rest can make the pain worse
- stretch and do exercises for back pain
- walking, swimming, yoga and pilates may be helpful
- take painkillers such as ibuprofen - ask your pharmacist if you're not sure you can take them
- get hot or cold compression packs from a pharmacy - a hot water bottle or frozen vegetables in a cloth will work too

It helps if you stay positive and understand that your pain should get better. People who manage to stay positive despite their pain tend to recover quicker.

## When to see your GP

Back pain usually gets better on its own within a few weeks or months.

### Talk to your GP if the pain:

- does not start to improve within a few weeks

- stops you doing your day-to-day activities
- is very severe or gets worse over time
- makes you worried
- means you're struggling to cope

Your GP may refer you to a specialist doctor or a physiotherapist.

You can also contact a physiotherapist first.

### Contact your GP straight away if you have back pain and:

- numbness or tingling around your genitals or buttocks (bum)
- it's worse at night
- trouble peeing
- loss of bladder or bowel control - peeing or pooing yourself
- chest pain
- feeling feverish or having a [high temperature](#) of 38 degrees Celsius or more
- unexplained weight loss
- a swelling or deformity in your back
- it does not improve after resting, or the pain is so bad you're having problems sleeping
- it started after a serious accident
- pain gets worse when sneezing, coughing or pooing
- the pain is coming from the top of your back, between your shoulders, rather than your lower back

These problems could be a sign of something more serious and need to be checked urgently.

## Treatments for back pain from specialists

A GP, hospital doctor or physiotherapist may recommend the following treatments:

- group exercise classes where you can strengthen muscles and improve posture
- physiotherapy treatments, such as massage from a physiotherapist
- psychological support, such as [cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\)](#), which can help you cope

Surgery is considered in some cases where a medical condition is causing the back pain.

## Causes of back pain

It's often not possible to identify the cause of back pain. Doctors call this 'non-specific' back pain.

Sometimes the pain may be from an injury such as a sprain or strain, but often it happens for no clear reason. It's rarely caused by anything serious.

Medical conditions that cause back pain include:

- slipped (prolapsed) disc - where a disc of cartilage in the spine presses on a nearby nerve
- sciatica - irritation of the nerve that runs from the pelvis to the feet

These conditions can cause more symptoms, such as numbness, weakness or tingling. They're treated differently from 'non-specific' back pain.

## Preventing back pain

It's difficult to prevent back pain.

Things that may help reduce your risk include:

- doing back exercises and stretches often - a GP or physiotherapist can tell you what to try
- [staying active](#) to help keep your back strong - adults should do at least 150 minutes of exercise a week
- avoiding sitting for a long time
- taking care when lifting
- checking your posture when sitting and using screens
- ensuring your mattress supports you properly
- trying to lose weight through a healthy diet and regular exercise (if you're overweight)

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