

# Overview



Cleveland Clinic

## Back Pain

Back pain is a symptom of a strain, sprain, spine disorder or condition affecting organs in your pelvis or belly. Pain can range from mild to severe, and it may spread to your legs or elsewhere. A healthcare provider can identify the cause of your back pain and recommend treatment to help you find relief.

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## Overview

### What is back pain?

Back pain is discomfort you feel anywhere along the back of your body, from the base of your neck to the top of your butt. It's a common symptom

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## What does back pain feel like?

Back pain can feel different depending on its cause. You might describe your pain as:

- Burning
- Aching
- Dull
- Sharp
- Shooting
- Stabbing
- Throbbing

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- Sudden [muscle twitches](#) or contractions, which can range from mild to extremely painful ([back spasms](#))

Pain or other sensations may spread (radiate) from your back to other areas, like your butt, hips or legs.

Certain positions (like standing up, bending over or lying down) may worsen or improve your symptoms. Pain may come and go. It may be worse at certain times of the day (like when you first wake up).

## What are the types of back pain?

Healthcare providers often describe back pain according to its location. You may have:

- [Upper and middle back pain](#). This is back pain you feel between the base of your neck and the bottom of your rib cage. Your [thoracic spine](#) runs through this area.
- [Lower back pain](#). This is back pain you feel below your ribcage. Your [lumbar spine](#) runs through this area.

[Muscles](#), tendons, ligaments and [nerves](#) surround your [spine](#) and help you move. But many different injuries and chronic conditions can affect all these moving parts, leading to back pain.

Lower back pain is more common than upper and middle back pain. This is

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## Acute vs. chronic back pain

Besides its location, healthcare providers also describe back pain according to how long it lasts:

- **Acute back pain** lasts less than four weeks.
- **Subacute back pain** can last anywhere from four to 12 weeks.
- **Chronic back pain** lasts more than 12 weeks.

# Possible Causes

## What are the most common causes of back

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sprains affect different parts of your back:

- **Strains** are injuries to your muscles or **tendons**. They can occur from a single event (like lifting a heavy object) or from prolonged, **repetitive** movements (like constantly bending down at work).
- **Sprains** are injuries to your **ligaments**. They typically occur after a sudden fall, twist or blunt force injury that stretches a ligament beyond its normal range of motion.

With a strain or sprain, you may notice:

- Muscle spasms
- Pain that gets worse when you move
- Decreased range of motion (it's hard to walk, bend or stand like you normally would)

For a sudden injury, you might hear a pop or feel a tearing sensation right when it happens.

## Other back pain causes

Besides strains and sprains, there are many other possible causes of back pain. These fall into several main groups:

- Mechanical or structural problems in your back
- Conditions that cause referred back pain (pain you feel in your back due

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## Mechanical or structural problems in your back

These are issues with any of the following:

- The [bones](#) that make up your [spine](#) (vertebrae)
- The flat, round cushions between your vertebrae (intervertebral disks)
- The soft tissues surrounding your vertebrae and disks, including muscles, tendons and ligaments

Examples of mechanical or structural problems that cause back pain include:

- [Arthritis](#). There are several forms of arthritis that can affect your back, including [osteoarthritis](#) and [ankylosing spondylitis](#). You may feel pain and stiffness in your lower back, with additional symptoms depending on the type of arthritis.
- [Degenerative disk disease](#). You may feel pain in your lower back that extends into your arms, legs or butt. The pain may come and go or get worse after certain movements, like bending or twisting.
- [Fractured spine](#). Sudden injuries that cause spinal fractures involve sharp, intense back pain that may get worse as you walk or move.

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- **Myofascial pain syndrome**. You may have aching, throbbing or vicelike pain, trigger points, weak muscles and/or other symptoms.
- **Sacroiliitis**. Inflammation leads to lower back pain, which may spread into your butt, hips or thighs.
- **Scoliosis**. This abnormal curvature of your spine can, in severe cases, cause back pain, trouble standing upright, leg pain, numbness or weakness.
- **Spinal stenosis**. Lumbar (lower back) spinal stenosis and related “**pinched nerves**” can cause lower back pain, sciatica, a heavy feeling in your legs, and pain that worsens with prolonged standing or walking.
- **Spondylolisthesis**. You may have lower back pain, muscle spasms in the back of your thigh, pain when bending over, and trouble walking or standing for long periods.
- **Spondylosis**. The most common symptom is lower back pain, which typically spreads into your thigh and butt. The pain gets worse when you move and eases when you’re less active or resting.

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## Conditions that cause referred back pain

Certain medical conditions can cause [referred pain](#). This is pain you feel in one part of your body (in this case, your back) due to an issue in another part of your body.

Referred back pain can happen due to a wide range of conditions affecting organs in your abdomen (belly) or pelvis. Specific examples of conditions and how you might experience back pain include:

- [Abdominal aortic aneurysm](#) can cause steady, deep pain in your lower back or belly. You may also have pain in your leg, groin or pelvic area and a pulsing sensation in your belly.
- [Gallbladder inflammation](#) may make you feel pain in your upper right belly that may spread to your back. The pain may feel sharp, dull or crampy and worsen when you take a deep breath. You may also have nausea, vomiting and a fever.
- [Kidney infection](#) might cause pain in your lower back or side, along with

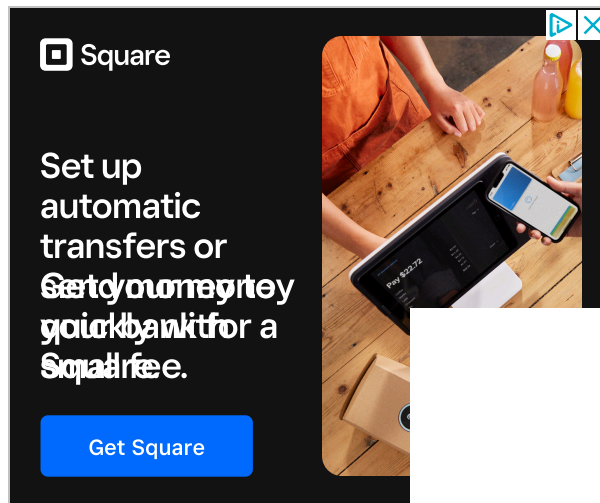
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pain may be dull or sharp and severe, and it may worsen in waves. You may have other symptoms like nausea and vomiting, blood in your pee, pain when peeing and inability to pee.

- **Pancreatitis** can result in moderate to severe abdominal pain that spreads to your back. The pain may feel worse when you lie flat, cough, eat a large meal or exercise.
- **Urinary tract infection** might lead to pain in your lower back, belly, side or pelvic area. You may also have cloudy pee that smells bad, pain when peeing, blood in your pee, and a frequent or urgent need to pee.

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In **women**:

- **Endometriosis** can cause pain in your lower back, belly and pelvic area.

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## Infections

Infections that may cause back pain include:

- **Spinal epidural abscess**, an infection in the space between your vertebra and the outermost layer of [meninges](#) (dura mater). Besides back pain, you may also have other symptoms like a fever, difficulty emptying your bladder or loss of the ability to control peeing and/or pooping.
- [Vertebral osteomyelitis](#), an infection of the bones in your spine. It typically causes lower back pain that persists when you're resting. The affected bone(s) may also feel tender to the touch, and you may have other symptoms like a fever.

## Tumors

[Spinal tumors](#) cause deep, aching back pain that starts slowly and gradually increases. The pain may be dull, persistent (even when you're resting) and worse overnight. You may also have sharp, shooting pain that spreads from your spine to your arms, hips, legs or feet.

## Why does my back hurt?

It's not always easy to tell the specific cause of your back pain on your own. You might be able to pinpoint a moment where an injury happened — for example, when you twisted a certain way or lifted a heavy object. But other

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Seeing a healthcare provider is the best way to learn what's causing your back pain and how to help it feel better.

## Diagnosing the cause of back pain

A healthcare provider will do a [physical exam](#) and ask you some questions about the pain, including what it feels like and what makes it worse or better. They'll also review your medical history and talk to you about the types of physical activity you do from day to day.

You may not need any testing, but if you do, your provider will explain which tests are necessary and why. These might include:

- Imaging tests, like [X-rays](#), [MRIs](#) (magnetic resonance imaging) or [CT scans](#) (computed tomography scans)
- [Electromyography \(EMG\)](#)

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# Care and Treatment

## How can I find back pain relief?

Back pain treatment depends on the cause and type (acute or chronic). Your healthcare provider may recommend one or more of the following treatments to address the underlying cause and/or ease your pain.

### Therapies

- [Physical therapy](#)
- [Integrative medicine therapies](#), like [acupuncture](#), [chiropractic adjustment](#), massage therapy or [yoga therapy](#)
- [Osteopathic manipulation](#)
- [Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation \(TENS\)](#), which is a type of pain relief therapy
- [Cognitive behavioral therapy \(CBT\)](#) to help you cope with severe or chronic pain

### Medications

- Medication injections, like an [epidural steroid injection \(ESI\)](#) or a [nerve block](#)

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- [Acetaminophen](#)
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs ([NSAIDs](#)), like ibuprofen
- Prescription pain-relieving medications, like [duloxetine](#) (because [opioids](#) have strong addiction potential, providers typically only prescribe them as a last resort when the benefits outweigh the risks)

## Surgery

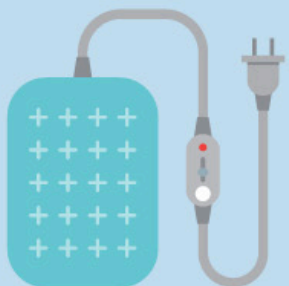
- Spine surgery (often [minimally invasive](#)).
- Surgery to treat an underlying cause of pain.

Keep in mind that a treatment that helped someone you know may not help you. This is because the effectiveness of certain treatments can vary widely according to the underlying cause of your back pain. For example, an ESI injection is more likely to help if you have a condition affecting your nerves (like a herniated disk or degenerative disk disease). But some people experience [little or no relief](#).

If you're frustrated by treatments that don't seem to be working, or if your pain gets worse, let your provider know right away. They're prepared to adjust your treatment plan and find what works best in your unique situation.

# Back pain

**Home remedies that may make you more comfortable include:**



**Using a heating pad to ease pain and stiffness.**



**Using an ice pack to manage pain and swelling.**



**Doing careful, purposeful movements.**

**Check with your provider about the level of physical activity that's safe and helpful for you.**



Your healthcare provider may recommend home remedies to manage your back pain.

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conditions that cause back pain take some time to heal. There's no quick and easy fix. Your provider may recommend home remedies to make you more comfortable, including:

- Using a heating pad to ease pain and stiffness
- Using an ice pack to manage pain and swelling
- Doing careful, purposeful movements ([exercises and stretches for back pain](#) include some yoga poses combined with [deep breathing techniques](#))

Your intuition might tell you to lie down and rest if your back hurts. But in many cases, gentle movement can help more than bed rest. It depends on the cause of your back pain. Check with your provider about the level of physical activity that's safe and helpful for you.



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Call a healthcare provider if:

- You have severe back pain
- Your back pain doesn't improve after one week
- You have back pain along with [sudden or severe weight loss](#)
- You notice additional symptoms like cloudy or [bloody pee](#), pain when you pee or [groin pain](#)
- You have [chest and back pain](#) when coughing (this can be a sign of an infection like [pneumonia](#) or [bronchitis](#))

## When to go to the emergency room

Call 911 or your local emergency services number if you have back pain or spasms along with any of the following:

- Fever, nausea and/or vomiting
- Severe abdominal pain
- Numbness, tingling or weakness in your arm(s) or leg(s)
- Severe pain, muscle spasms or muscle weakness
- Loss of the ability to control peeing and/or pooping ([urinary](#) and/or [fecal](#) incontinence)
- Problems fully emptying your bladder ([urinary retention](#))

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# Additional Common Questions

## Can pregnancy cause back pain?

Yes, it's common to experience [back pain during pregnancy](#). This can range from mild to severe. You should tell your provider if you're experiencing any [pregnancy aches and pains](#) so they can help you find ways to feel better.

## A note from Cleveland Clinic

Back pain isn't always easy to describe with words, but you know when you have it. And it can make doing the simplest tasks difficult or downright impossible. The good news is many causes of back pain — like sprains and strains — are temporary. When each minute feels like an eternity, it's hard to imagine the pain going away. But things will get better. Your provider can recommend home remedies and/or treatments to help.

Living with chronic back pain can feel like a long and tiring journey through unknown terrain. But it's not a journey you have to take alone. Your healthcare provider can offer treatment options to target the cause of the pain and help you feel better from day to day. They're also available to answer your questions and talk through any concerns that come up.



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