

Back in Action

Information Book



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This book is inspired by “Back in Action, A Guide to Understanding Back Pain and Learning What To Do About It,” created by Janet Street, ARNP, MN, Marcia Hunt, BA, Dan Cherkin, PhD, and Richard Deyo, MD, MPH, published by Center for Health Studies, Group Health Cooperative ©1991.

While the general principles of the original Back in Action book have not changed since it was published, more research has emerged.¹ The current version of this guide is informed by new research and feedback from patients and health care providers.

1. Qaseem A. et al. Noninvasive Treatments for Acute, Subacute, and Chronic Low Back Pain: A clinical Practice Guideline From the American College of Physicians. *Annals of Internal Medicine* 2017. doi:10.7326/M16-2367.

Introduction

Although low back with leg pain is rarely caused by a serious underlying disease, it can cause a lot of discomfort. It can also lead to different feelings, like anxiousness, and can disrupt daily activities. Research shows that many back and leg pain sufferers don't understand why they have pain, what they can do to get better, or how to prevent future back problems. This can cause people to worry instead of doing things that can help them get better faster.

The information in this book is based on the latest research. Having accurate information can help you feel better and help you take care of your back and leg pain.

Here are some key things to remember:

- Most people's low back and leg pain gets better over time.
- Low back with leg pain is rarely caused by something serious.
- Moving is better than not moving. Increasing activity as soon as possible can help you recover, even if it causes some pain.
- You are the most important person in bringing about recovery and a return to normal activities.
- Every person is different. We will help you find out what works best for you.
- The purpose of this book is to give you information about your condition and what you can expect. It will also give you some ideas for safe and effective ways to get you [back in action!](#)



Why me? What's the cause?

Why me?

Back and leg pain problems are VERY common and almost unavoidable! About 8 out of every 10 adults experience back problems at some point in their lives and over half have backaches each year. Some people develop leg symptoms. While most people first experience back problems in their 20s or 30s, they can begin at any age and for many reasons.

What's causing my back to hurt?

First, it's helpful to understand the structures of your spine. Your spine (or backbone) is a complex, flexible column made up of many small bones called vertebrae, linked to one another by joints. Between each vertebra is a cushion called a disc. The vertebrae and discs are surrounded by ligaments and muscles. All of these structures need to work together for the spine to function properly. When they don't, it can cause back problems and pain. Examples include:

- muscle weakness
- muscle tension or spasm
- back sprains including ligament or muscle tears
- joint problems
- bulging or herniated discs

Many people with low back problems also experience pain in their buttocks and one or both legs. When leg pain is caused by a problem in the back, it is called "referred pain". This is because even though the pain is felt in the leg, the problem is really coming from the back. This is often due to inflammation or irritation in the back joints, muscles, or discs. Most back and leg pain is caused by this.

Occasionally, people experience back and leg pain when the nerves that leave the spinal cord get irritated or pinched. This causes different symptoms like shooting or burning pain, numbness, tingling, or weakness in the leg. When this happens, the leg pain is often worse than the back pain. Irritated nerves can remain sore and sensitive for a long time after the original injury or irritation. The good news is that this lingering pain is not a sign that further damage is being done to your body.

Many people can't pinpoint a specific event or accident that triggered their back and leg problem. It's also very difficult for clinicians to find the *exact* cause for these types of conditions. Often, this causes people with low back and leg pain to worry or get frustrated.

The **good news** is that very few patients with back and leg pain have a serious problem. The examination you had helped rule out serious disease. And even though you may not know the exact cause of your back and leg problem, **you** can do things that will help you recover.

What can I do for my pain?

There are several things you can do to manage your pain, even when it gets severe. Remember, even if your pain is really bad, there is still a very good chance that you can get better.

Keep Moving

While you may not feel like moving around when you have pain, research shows that you will do better if you do even a small amount of activity. While you shouldn't do anything that causes extreme pain, you also shouldn't be scared of the pain either. Some pain is normal when you are trying to get back in action. The secret is finding activities that you feel okay doing and start slowly.

Things you can try include:

- Short walks, even for a couple of minutes
- Changing positions frequently
- Avoid sitting for long periods of time (not more than 15 to 20 minutes)

Use heat or cold

Heat can be helpful for managing pain and soothing tight muscles. Some people find ice helpful for numbing their pain. When you feel pain in your leg, remember to apply the heat or cold to your back, since that's where the problem is coming from.

- Good sources of heat include hot water bottles, electric heating pads, microwavable grain bags, or a hot bath or shower.
- Good sources of cold include an ice pack or a bag of frozen vegetables.
- Apply heat or cold for up to 15 minutes and re-apply every few hours. Place a cloth between the heat or cold source and your skin to prevent damage.

Use medications if needed

Over-the-counter medications as you normally use them, can also be taken. These can help manage your pain.

Do I need tests or a specialist?

Do I need an X-ray?

It used to be very common for everyone with low back pain to get an x-ray. We now know that the causes of low back pain rarely show up on x-rays. Many x-ray findings, like degenerative disc disease, are common in people without back problems and are part of the natural aging process. Also, x-rays that aren't needed may expose patients to unnecessary radiation. Generally, x-rays are only taken when a doctor finds specific things in the patient's physical exam or health history that suggests x-rays will be useful.

Do I need a CT scan or MRI?

Most patients with low back and leg pain don't need a CT scan or MRI. This is because they often find things that aren't important and are common even in people without low back pain. These tests alone can't prove the cause of pain. They are only one part of an assessment that includes the examination and your symptoms. If your symptoms worsen significantly, your health care provider may wish to order these tests.

Should I be seen by a specialist?

The health care providers you have seen are well trained to examine patients with low back and leg pain. They have ruled out serious underlying diseases. If your symptoms get very severe, your health care provider may order special tests or refer you to a specialist.

Studies show that non-surgical care is a good option for patients with back and leg pain. Surgery should only be considered:

- In emergency cases (bowel or bladder problems or numbness in the groin or rectal area).
- In special cases with specific nerve problems that are worsening and cannot be managed by non-surgical treatments.

Activity and exercise



Should I restrict my activity?

Too much rest will hurt you more than it will help over the long run. If you have a severe flare up, lying down for brief periods of time may relieve symptoms. However, too much inactivity can slow down your recovery.

Remember to get up and walk around frequently, even if it hurts. Feeling some pain when you're returning to regular activity is normal and doesn't mean you're harming yourself. In most cases, it's important to get back to your regular activity level as soon as possible. If your regular activity seems too much, take it in small steps. Do what you can, when you can and gradually you will feel better.

What about exercise?

Regular exercise, like walking, swimming, or stationary bicycling, are excellent activities. They can help strengthen your back and abdominal muscles as well as your heart and lungs. These exercises can help you increase your endurance and energy levels. They can also help you lose extra body weight. Exercise is a good way to prevent your back and leg pain being a problem in the future.

A walking program is a good place to begin. Start slowly, then gradually increase your speed and the length of time you walk. Wear comfortable clothing and low-heeled, lace-up shoes with cushioned soles. Once you can walk briskly for 30 minutes each day, you may be able to move on to more vigorous exercises. If walking increases your pain a lot, you may need to start slowly. You can do this by walking inside your home or your yard for several minutes every few hours.

When should I contact my provider?

Although it is very, very rare, some people with back and leg pain develop problems that require immediate medical attention.

Be sure to contact your health care provider or go to an emergency room immediately if you are having trouble controlling your bowel or bladder, or if your groin or rectal area becomes numb.

While the following are not emergency situations, you should tell your study provider if any of the following occur:

- Weakness or numbness in your feet or legs.
- Severe pain that is keeping you from sleeping and/or working.
- Pain that is causing you a lot of worry.

What about other treatments?

There are several treatment options for back and leg pain conditions. Importantly, **no one treatment has been shown to be the best**. Treatment options for back and leg pain include acupuncture, massage, medications, exercise, and spinal manipulation. In some cases of back and leg pain, especially when there has been substantial nerve damage, steroid injections or surgery may be options to consider.

We ask that you don't start new treatments for your back and leg pain during the first 12 weeks of the study. If you feel you need another type of treatment, let your study provider know.



What should I tell others?



At work

Work can be stressful, especially if your job makes your back and leg pain worse. It can also be difficult if your supervisor or coworkers don't understand your problem. Here are some tips for communicating with others at work about your back and leg pain.

- Make it clear to your supervisor that although you may sometimes be limited in your activities, you wish to return to your normal activities as soon as possible.
- Together, plan how you can be most useful while your back and leg pain still limits you. There are times where you may need to stop or modify some of your usual job-related activities until you are better.
- Some of your coworkers may not understand the amount of pain you're feeling. Don't waste your time trying to convince them how bad the pain is. Instead, put your energy into being as productive as you possibly can, while being clear about what your limitations are.

Family and friends

People who don't have pain may have trouble understanding how it affects you and your life. You may have to help your family understand that it can take some time to figure out how to manage your back and leg pain better.

- Discuss your treatment with your family and let them know that you want to return to normal as soon as possible.
- Communicate to them that you may need to reduce some of your usual activities when you experience flare ups.
- Ask your family to help you by encouraging you to gradually increase your activity level every day, even if this increase causes you some pain.

What about my posture?

Paying attention to your posture through the day can help manage your back and leg pain. One way to do this is to learn how to find a **neutral spine** position. This is when the curves in your neck, mid-back and low back are lined up in a way that supports your body.

Using a **neutral spine** position during your daily activities helps keep your back strong. It can also help you feel more comfortable.

Your Spine's 3 Curves



How do I find my spine's 'neutral zone'?

Standing

1. **Stand** with your feet a comfortable width apart; roll your shoulders back and look straight ahead (this will help you maintain the curves in your neck and mid-back).
2. **Tighten** your stomach muscles.
3. **Rock your pelvis backward** by slowly pulling your belly button towards your spine (it should feel like you are making a "C" with your spine).
4. **Release** your stomach muscles.
5. **Rock your pelvis forward** by slowly pushing your belly button out in front of you (it should feel like you are arching your back).
6. **Repeat** rocking your pelvis backward and forward a few times; try to identify the range between the two positions where you feel most comfortable. **This is your spine's neutral zone.**

Sitting

1. **Sit** on a chair with feet flat on the floor. Roll your shoulders back and look straight ahead. If your back is very painful, you can try rolling up a towel and placing it in the curve of your low back.
2. Perform the same steps 2-6 described above for standing.

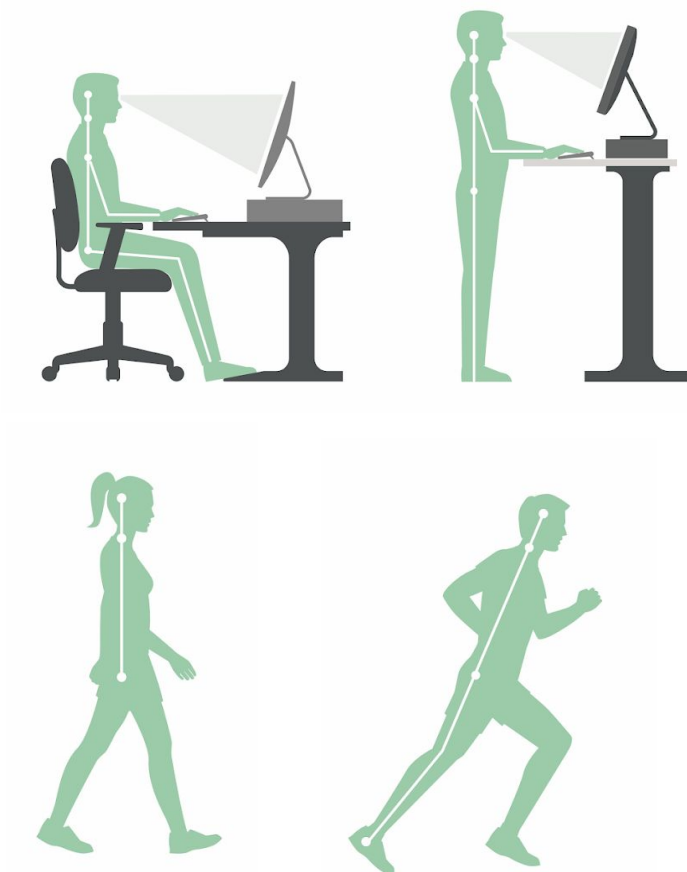
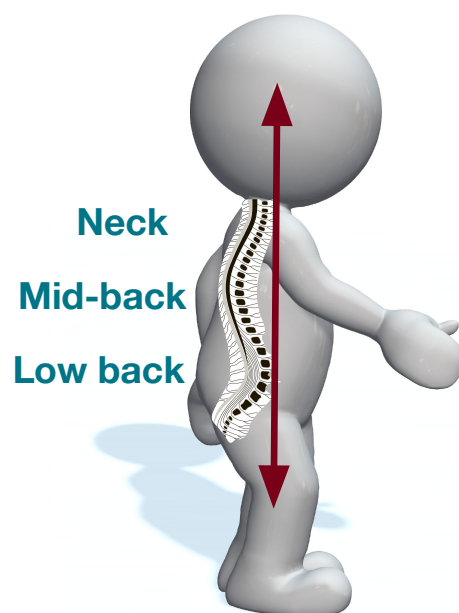
Neutral spine

How does keeping a neutral spine position help?

- It gets your muscles working in a way that keeps your spine strong
- It can help you find a comfortable position
- It can help you for irritating your back when you lift and do other activities

When is it helpful to use “neutral spine”?

- When you are doing any of your daily activities, at work, and during exercise
- When you are experiencing back and leg pain
- Throughout the day so your muscles learn how to find this position more easily



Another way to help find a neutral spine posture is to think about lining up your ears, shoulder and hips when you are in different postures

Tips for getting comfortable

In addition to using **neutral spine**, here are some other tips to help you keep comfortable.

- **Driving:** when driving for long periods, use a pillow or rolled-up towel behind your back and be sure to stop at regular intervals to walk around.
- **Sex:** as long as you don't have too much pain, sexual activity will not harm your back. In general, the partner with back pain may be most comfortable with firm back support. Side-lying may also be more comfortable. You may find other positions that work best for your particular situation.
- **Standing:** if you need to stand in one position for a long time, put a low stool under one foot.
- **Sitting:** use a firm seat and a small pillow or rolled-up towel behind the small of your back for support. Make sure your feet rest on the floor or on a low stool, whichever is more comfortable. Get up and move around frequently (every 15 or 20 minutes).
- **Lifting:** when you lift heavy things, squat down by bending your knees and keep item close to your body. Use the muscles in your legs to lift.
- **Smartphones and tablets:** when using devices remember to keep a 'neutral spine' by raising them up closer to eye level.
- **Getting out of bed:** When getting out of bed, turn onto your side, bend your knees toward your chest, then drop your feet over the edge of the bed as you push yourself up with your arms.
- **Sleeping:** try different sleeping positions to find one that is most comfortable.
 - Place a small pillow under your head or no pillow at all.
 - Sleep on your back with a pillow under your knees.
 - Sleep on your side with your knees bent and a pillow between them.