



# My Aching Back

A Guide to Acute  
Low Back Pain



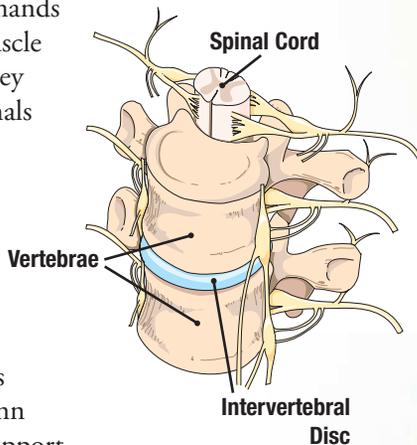
If your back aches, you're not alone. In fact, 70% to 80% of American adults have experienced low back pain. Back pain is the 5th most common reason people seek medical care. And it's also expensive—with an annual tab of over \$50 billion.

Back aches are common, painful, and expensive—but they're rarely serious. **Half the episodes resolve in less than a week**, and three-quarters are gone within a month.

## The Normal Back

Like every part of the human body, the back is complex. Your “backbone” is not a bone at all but a column of 24 individual bones called *vertebrae*. These bones are separated by *intervertebral discs*, which act as shock absorbers. Each disc has a soft core surrounded by a capsule of fibrous tissue. Nerve roots run out from the spinal cord, passing between the vertebral bodies. These spinal nerves transmit the commands responsible for muscle movement, and they carry back the signals of sensation (See Figure).

A group of strong ligaments holds the vertebrae together. Muscles run along the sides of the spinal column to provide extra support.

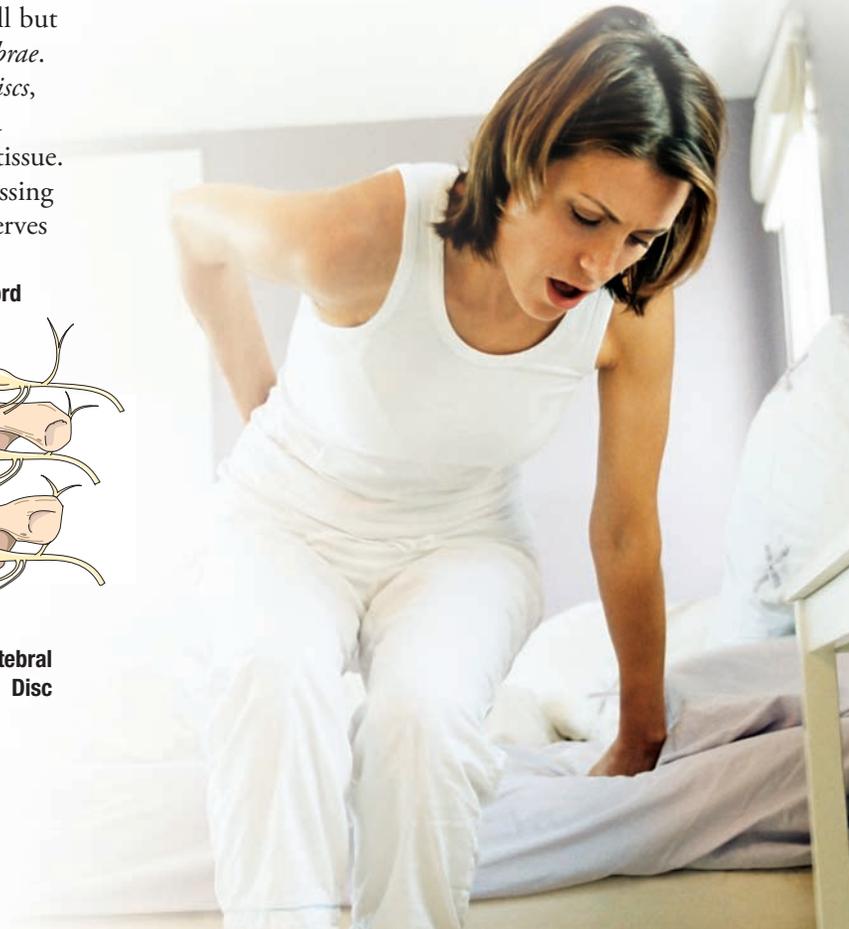


## What Causes Back Pain?

There are many causes of back pain. The most common are:

- |                             |                  |
|-----------------------------|------------------|
| • Bulging discs             | • Pinched nerves |
| • Sciatica                  | • Arthritis      |
| • Muscle spasms and strains |                  |

**Poor posture, tight muscles, and abnormal spine alignment** are other causes of back pain. More serious problems, such as osteoporosis, compression fractures, tumors, and infections, are much less common. Often, the exact cause of back pain remains a mystery.



## When is Back Pain Serious?

Pain is always serious to the sufferer, but it **doesn't necessarily signal a major medical problem**. If you have ordinary back pain, you can probably take care of it yourself. But you should see a doctor without delay if you have any of these warning symptoms:

### Back Pain Warnings

- Onset of pain **before age 20** or **after age 55**
- **Recent major trauma**, including motor vehicle accidents, falls, and severe sports injuries
- **Pain radiating down a leg**, particularly if accompanied by:
  - Numbness or loss of sensation
  - Weakness or loss of muscular strength
  - Impaired bowel or bladder control
- Pain that is **constant and does not vary** with motion
- Pain in the upper back or chest
- Pain that **increases at night** or when lying down
- Unexplained **fever of 101° or more**
- Unexplained **weight loss of 10 pounds or more**
- A **previous diagnosis of cancer** or another major illness
- Use of **steroids or other drugs** that block the immune system
- History of **drug abuse**

## Can Medications Help?

Drugs won't speed recovery, but they can ease the pain and help you get up and around.

For ordinary low back pain, treat yourself with non-prescription drugs. Start with a simple pain reliever such as *acetaminophen*. It's not as strong as some other drugs, but it has fewer side effects. If needed, use high doses, but not more than 1,000 mg 4 times a day.

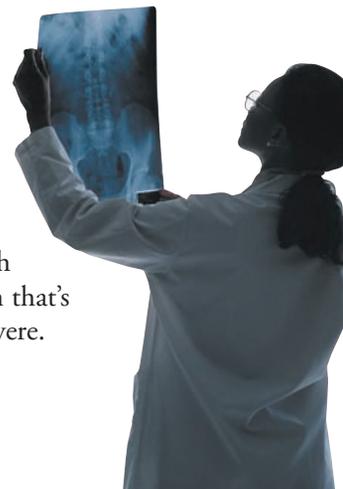
Most doctors recommend a *non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication* (NSAID) as the next treatment. Stronger prescription painkillers and muscle relaxants are available for more severe pain.



## Should I Have X-rays or Lab Tests?

If your pain lasts for as long as 4 to 6 weeks, your doctor may recommend a series of x-rays along with a few simple lab tests such as a complete blood count, *erythrocyte sedimentation rate* (ESR), and *urinalysis*. More elaborate tests are rarely helpful for ordinary acute low back pain.

CTs should be used only when detailed imaging is needed and an MRI cannot be performed. MRIs are not needed for uncomplicated low back pain, but they can be very important for patients with warning signs or with pain that's prolonged or unusually severe.





## Are Other Treatments Available?

Although most acute low back pain will resolve with a simple, conservative, self-directed program, **some people require additional therapy for difficult or chronic pain.** A *physical therapy-rehabilitation* program can be very helpful. If physical therapy doesn't do the trick, doctors may treat selected patients by injecting steroids into the painful area.

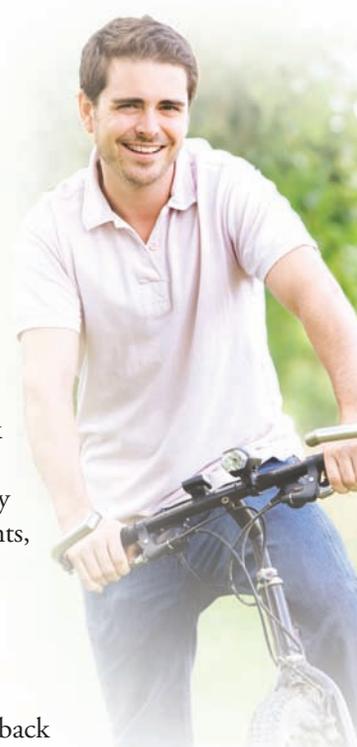


If needed, surgery is also available. It may be required, even urgent, in cases of complicated back pain (see *Warning Signs*), but it should be the last resort for uncomplicated pain. If a herniated lumbar disc is responsible, a *lumbar discectomy* is the preferred approach.

## How Can I Keep My Back Healthy?

Exercises to keep your back flexible and to strengthen your abdominal and back muscles may help. **Good posture and body mechanics are essential.** In particular, be careful when you lift. Keep heavy objects close to your body, and be sure to bend your knees and lift with your legs, not your back.

The best way to prevent back pain is to keep the rest of your body healthy. Exercise is the key. Active, fit folks have less back pain than inactive, out-of-shape people. Swimming, walking, and biking are particularly worthwhile for those who've had back pain in the past. A good diet will also help—not by nourishing bones and joints, but by preventing obesity.



## Back to Basics

Because it's so common, back pain is a hot topic for both health care professionals and the general public. Listen to the options, and then decide what's best for you. **For most people, a simple self-planned program will control acute low back pain.** But whether you treat yourself or get professional help, you should always listen to your body, staying alert for the warning signs that could indicate serious trouble. Fortunately, such warnings are uncommon. For most adults, basic care will banish backaches.

*The best way to prevent back pain is to keep the rest of your body healthy.*



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