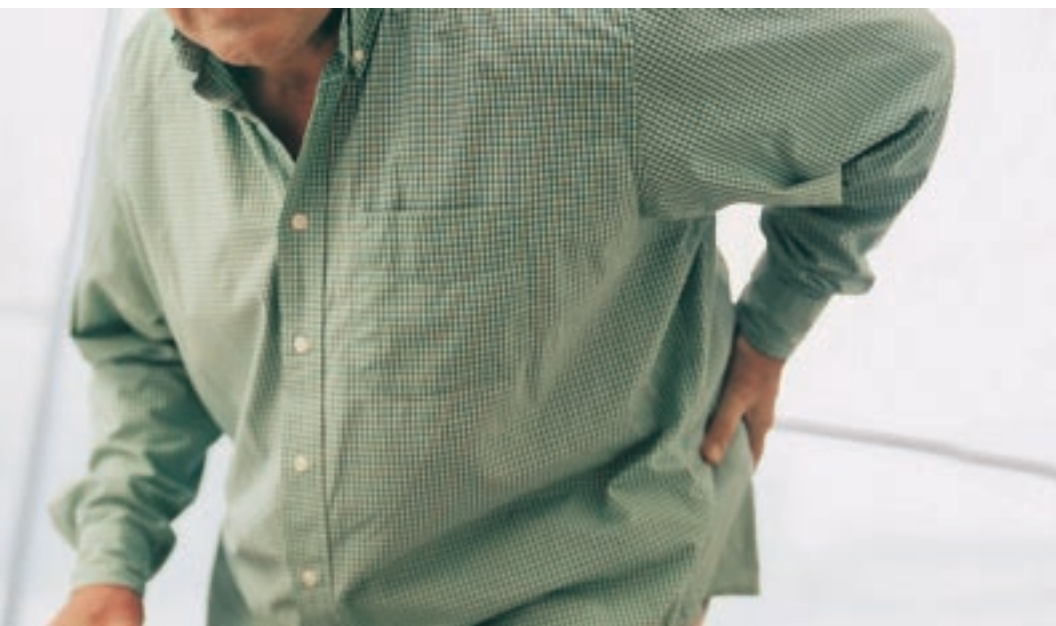


self-management for

ACUTE LOW BACK PAIN



What is making my back hurt?

Back pain is a common problem. Nearly 80 percent of adults will experience back pain at some time in their lives. Most cases of back pain improve within four to six weeks. Even though back problems can be painful and frustrating, they are rarely caused by serious diseases. While there is no “quick fix” for back pain, the good news is that we now know much more about why pain is often felt in the lower back. We also know more about managing back pain than ever before.

Where does back pain come from?

The back is one of the strongest parts of your body. It is made up of a number of different body parts, including bones, joints, ligaments, discs, muscles, and nerves. Back pain can begin in any of these areas.

Bones. The bones in the back are called vertebrae.

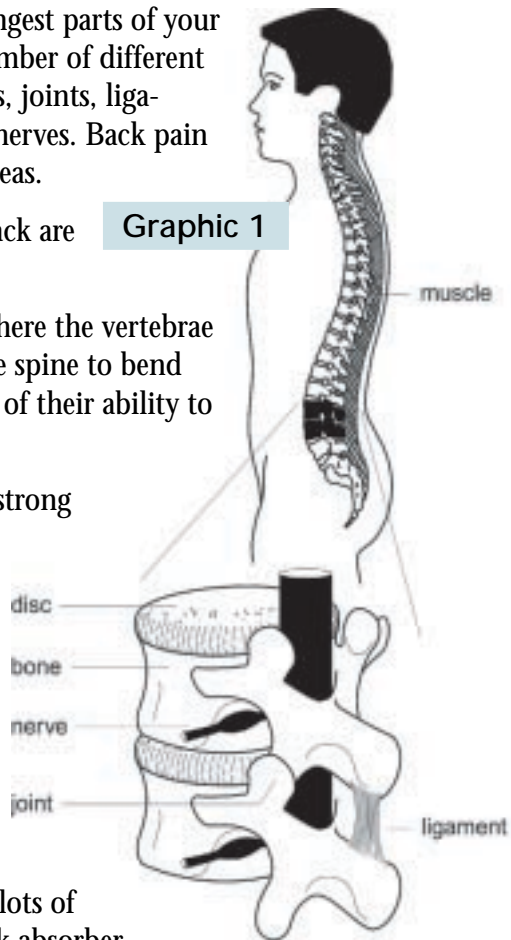
Joints. A joint is formed where the vertebrae meet. These joints allow the spine to bend and move. Joints lose some of their ability to move as you age.

Ligaments. Ligaments are strong bands that hold the bones together. When ligaments are pulled or over-stretched, it is called a sprain.

Discs. Discs are made up of many layers of fibrocartilage with a soft center called a nucleus.

Discs are designed to carry lots of pressure and act like a shock absorber.

Graphic 1



However, over time the discs can lose their elasticity and lose their ability to absorb shock and to provide stability. Although this can be very painful, it is rarely dangerous.

Muscles. The muscles surrounding your back give it support and allow you to move. When muscles are pulled, it is called a strain.

Nerves. Nerves carry messages to the brain and control the muscles. The nerves of your spine branch out from behind the discs and spread to other parts of your body. (See Graphic 1.)

What makes it hurt?

Most back pain results from injury or irritation to one or more of the parts described above. Most commonly this is due to:

- pulling or twisting when lifting, which causes strains or sprains of muscles, ligaments, or discs
- repetitive activities like frequent bending or stooping or unhealthy postures like sitting too long or slouching
- changes to the normal condition of the joints and discs over time

What can I do to help my back?

The following are techniques to decrease pain and help you move around easily.

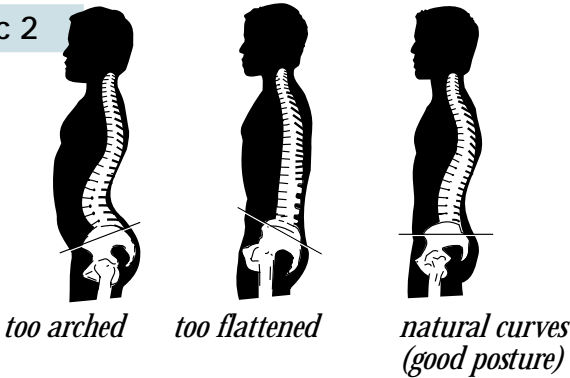
Apply ice. Use ice right away. Ice reduces pain and inflammation. Be careful not to use ice for more than 20 minutes, every 2 hours. Even though heat is used to ease tension, heat might cause more swelling in the first three days. Place the ice on the painful area in a fanny pack while you are up and about. Apply ice consistently as long as you have pain. If you have diabetes or circulatory problems, limit applying ice and heat to 10 minutes.

Take medications as directed. Common medications are acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen (such as Motrin) and naproxen sodium (such as Aleve). In some cases, prescription pain medications may help. It may take 10 to 14 days of taking it as prescribed to be fully effective.

Use good posture and body positions. Try the following tips to move with less pain and get around more easily.

During this stage, try to keep your body in a “neutral,” comfortable position (midway between flat and arched). (See Graphic 2 showing neutral positioning.)

Graphic 2

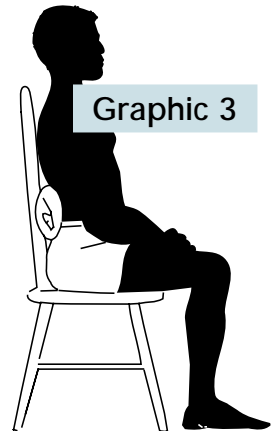


When you are at home or at work, use these tips to keep your back in a neutral, comfortable position and to help speed recovery:

Sitting.

If sitting hurts, don't do it. If you must sit, avoid sitting in one position for more than 30 minutes.

- A towel roll to support the low back may help maintain a neutral position and reduce discomfort while sitting. (See Graphic 3.)
- Avoid sitting with legs straight out in front, as in sitting up in bed, sitting in the bathtub, or sitting on the floor.
- While sitting in a recliner, place a pillow under your knees to keep them bent.



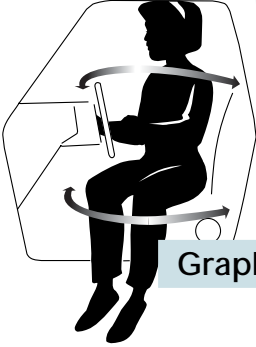
Graphic 4

Rising from sitting.

- Scoot toward the edge of the chair or bed.
- Lean forward bending at the hips. (See Graphic 4.)
- Use your arms to push to a standing position.



Getting in and out of a car.



Graphic 5

- Try not to twist your back when you get into and out of a car.
- Holding your back in a neutral position, move the car seat all the way back.
- Keep your back and legs facing the same direction as you turn to get in or out of the car. (See Graphic 5.)

- Use your arms to push to a standing position.

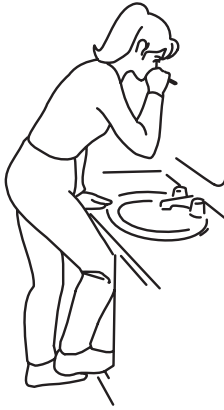
Standing.

- Use good standing posture to protect your back and to decrease the load on the discs.
- Keep your knees relaxed, not straight.
- Keep your feet a few inches apart with your weight evenly distributed.
- Place one foot on a stool to help maintain the neutral position.
- Keep the neutral position by bending from the hips rather than from the back.

Bending forward.

Try to avoid rounding your back and bending forward with activities, such as:

- shaving
- brushing your teeth
- making the bed
- moving around in the kitchen
- dressing



Graphic 6

Try the following

- Use the waiter's bow or hip hinge.
- Place your foot on the ledge of an open cupboard for activities while standing. (See Graphic 6.)

Dressing.

- Avoid bending your back (as in touching your toes). Wear slip-on shoes, when possible.
- To put on socks and shoes, bring your leg up toward your body or place your foot on a chair to keep your back in a neutral position. Bend from the hips. (See previous page for "rising from sitting"—refer to Graphic 4.) If this is difficult, wear slip-on shoes.
- To put on pants, try leaning with your back against the wall for support.

Sleeping.

Try applying ice to your back before lying down and avoid sitting for more than 30 minutes before bedtime.

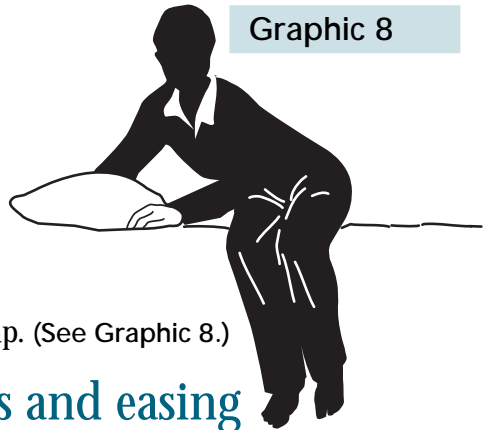
- Try both of these positions to find what is most comfortable for you.
- Lying on your side, use one pillow between your legs for comfort.
- Lying on your back, use one pillow under your knees. (See Graphic 7.)



Graphic 7

Getting in and out of bed.

- Lie on your side.
- Bend both knees up.
Keep your back and legs facing the same direction as you ease your feet over the side of the bed.
- Push with your arms to sit up. (See Graphic 8.)



Graphic 8

Low back stretches and easing movements for your back

The following are movements to decrease pain and help you move around easily.

General guidelines

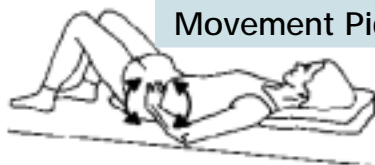
- Movements should be pain-free. Remember to stay relaxed and keep breathing as you perform these movements.
- Avoid movements that increase any leg and back symptoms, such as pain, numbness, or tingling. It is OK to feel stretching in the leg and back muscles.

Start by doing five repetitions of each of the following movements. Add a few more repetitions every three to four days until you are able to do about 10 repetitions of each.

□ Pelvic rock

- Lie on your back with your knees bent and your low back in a comfortable position. Place your fingers on the pelvic bones.
- Rock your pelvis back and forth finding your comfortable neutral range (midway between flat and arched).

See Movement Picture A.



Movement Picture A

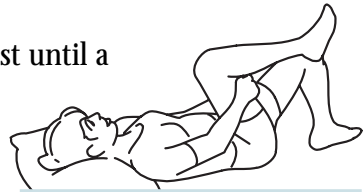
□ Abdominal isometric

- As on the previous page, with your low back in a comfortable, neutral position, place your fingers on the lower abdomen to feel the lower abdominal muscles.
- To gently contract the muscles, try to tighten by drawing in your belly button without moving the lower back. Once you are able to feel the contraction, hold it for 5 to 10 seconds. Try counting out loud to avoid holding your breath.



□ Knee toward chest

- Place hands behind the thigh.
- Gently pull the leg toward the chest until a comfortable stretch is felt in the lower back or buttock. Hold for 10 to 15 seconds. You might try this exercise holding a towel. Place the towel behind the thigh before pulling the leg toward the chest.



Movement Picture B

See Movement Picture B.



Movement Picture C

□ Trunk rotation

- Lie on your back with your knees bent.
- Slowly rock the knees to one side, then to the other in a small, pain-free range of

motion. Allow the back to rotate slightly, keeping the feet on the floor. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds.

See Movement Picture C.

❑ Cat – Camel

- On your hands and knees, find the neutral, comfortable position for your lower back. Gently round your back, tucking your pelvis. Then, let your lower back sag a bit.
- Rock back and forth between tucking and sagging in a small, comfortable range of motion.

Movement Picture D



See Movement Picture D.

Self-traction techniques

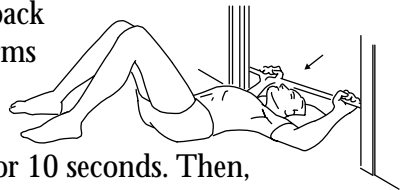
Try the following techniques to relieve pressure on the spine by unloading and relaxing the back muscles. Use only the self-traction movements that your therapist has instructed you to use. If you feel increased pain, avoid that movement until you speak with your therapist.

❑ Position of comfort

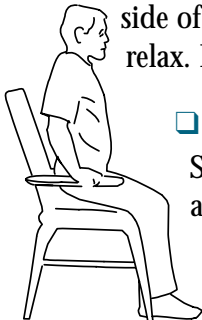
Lie on the floor with your lower legs supported on a chair or sofa with hips and knees bent. Gently push against your thighs with both hands. Hold for 10 seconds. Repeat several times until symptoms ease.

❑ Traction pulling a stick

Lie in front of a doorway on your back with your knees bent. With your arms overhead, gently pull a cane or broomstick against the opposite



side of the doorway. Hold for 10 seconds. Then, relax. Repeat several times, until symptoms ease.

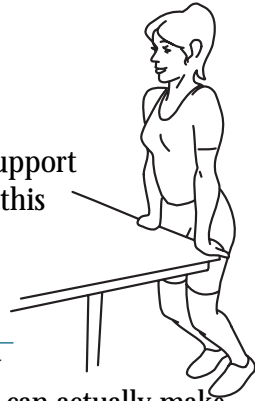


❑ Traction sitting

Sit in a chair with arm rests. Push up with your arms until your bottom slightly clears the chair. Hold the position as long as comfortable.

□ Traction standing

Leaning forward over a countertop or table, support part of your weight through your arms. Hold this position as long as you are comfortable.



Walking

Resting one to three days after an acute injury may be recommended, but too much bed rest can actually make your back pain worse and delay your recovery. People who are physically active recover more quickly and have less frequent back problems. It is helpful to continue at least light and easy activity, as long as your symptoms don't worsen.

Walking is helpful for most back pain. Consider these tips:

- Take short walks frequently throughout the day.
- As you walk, pull your stomach in slightly. This helps support your back.
- Limit step length to avoid more tension on the back.
- Wear athletic shoes.
- Where it is safe, walk on roads that have asphalt surfaces. Sidewalks are a harder surface and do not provide as much “cushion” for your back.

Call your primary care physician if you have . . .

- loss of bladder or bowel control or difficulty in starting or stopping urination
- weakness in the legs and/or numbness in the genital or rectal area
- worsening back pain symptoms
- pain that radiates down the leg
- pain that now radiates down both legs
- weakness or numbness that is preventing you from standing or walking comfortably

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at **members.kp.org** to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, message boards, health classes, and much more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- With a *Kaiser Permanente Healthphone Directory*, you can pick topics and messages to hear on Kaiser Permanente Healthphone (1-800-332-7563; TTY: 1-800-777-9059). Request a *Healthphone Directory* from your Health Center or Department; or download a copy at **members.kp.org**. (Search “Healthphone”.)

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse any brand names; any similar products may be used.