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BANISH BACK PAIN

By: [Linda Hepler, BSN, RN](#)

Whether simply annoying – or downright excruciating – back pain is an all-too-familiar problem for many. In fact, about 80 percent of us have experienced back pain at some point in our lives. And back pain is one of the most common reasons for a doctor visit.

UNDERLYING CAUSES

It's important to understand that back pain is not actually a diagnosis in itself but a symptom of an underlying medical condition, says Hector Lopez, MD, MS, CSCS, owner of Northeast Spine and Sports Medicine in New York City. "It often results from a bio-mechanical problem, which is a problem with how your spine, pelvis, hips and lower extremities move relative to each other," he explains.

A common mechanical cause of back pain, according to Lopez, is intervertebral disk degeneration, which simply means that the disks located between the vertebrae of the spine are breaking down, resulting in decreased cushioning ability. If a disk becomes too weak, the outer part can tear, allowing the inside of the disk to "herniate," or push through the tear and press on nerves beside it.

In addition to mechanical problems, other causes of back pain include spinal injuries from contact sports, accidents or falls, and sprains and strains from twisting or lifting improperly. As we grow older, painful arthritis can affect the facet joints of the spine (the joints that allow flexion, extension and bending movements), and we're also susceptible to spinal stenosis, a narrowing of the spinal column that puts pressure on the spinal cord and nerves.

WHEN TO SEEK TREATMENT

The good news is that the vast majority of those who suffer back pain – even those with herniated disks – never need surgery, says Scott Blumenthal, MD, a surgeon with the Texas Back Institute. "A full 90 percent of our patients are treated successfully with non-surgical methods," he adds.

When to seek treatment? "One of the biggest mistakes people make is waiting too long for treatment," says Blumenthal. "If you hurt your back, you can try home remedies like ice and rest. But after about 48 hours, bed rest is the worst thing for you. You get atrophied and deconditioned – it's like being in a cast."

In most cases, it's fine to see your family doctor first. Many times, a medical history and physical exam will be enough to diagnose the problem, but you may need diagnostic testing such as an x-ray, MRI or CT scan to confirm abnormalities that may be causing the pain.

Whatever the diagnosis, one of the most common treatments recommended, says Blumenthal, is physical therapy, which often involves massage, hot and cold packs, and electrical stimulation, as well as strengthening exercises. Doctors may also prescribe a variety of anti-inflammatory medications, muscle relaxants and even possibly injections to treat back pain. With treatment, most back pain is resolved within 4-6 weeks.

As for surgery, it's generally indicated only after non-surgical methods have failed, says Michael Perry, MD, Medical Director and co-founder of the Laser Spine Institute in Tampa, Florida. "We have to have tried conservative treatment for at least three months, without relief, and have exhausted all options."

According to Perry, there are a number of surgical treatment options, from minimally invasive endoscopic surgery ("where you can get right off the table and go to dinner that evening"), to open surgery, which is more common with severe stenosis of the spine or conditions where the spine is unstable.

HIGH TECH SURGICAL OPTIONS

Total disk replacement, or TDR, is at the forefront of treatment for severe intervertebral disk degeneration, says Blumenthal. Available for more than a decade in Europe, the technique was approved by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration in 2004. TDR is an ideal option rather than lumbar fusion surgery for an active person, he adds. "While lumbar fusion can limit the full motion of the spine, TDR preserves motion while relieving pain."

Not everyone is a good candidate for TDR. To be considered, the person must:

- Have only one or two disks causing back pain
- Have no spinal deformity (like scoliosis) or significant facet joint disease or bony compression on nerves
- Have had no prior major surgery on the lumbar spine
- Must not be significantly overweight

NUTRITION AND PAIN RELIEF

Eating a healthy diet is an important step in both reducing and preventing back pain. Key nutrients and supplements include the following:

- Vitamin D3 and calcium can help to prevent osteoporosis, which may cause bone fractures that lead to back pain. Vitamin D3 also is a powerful anti-inflammatory. Find calcium in dairy products and green leafy veggies as well as fortified orange juice. Vitamin D3 can be found in fortified milk and nutritional supplements.
- Proteolytic enzymes, or "Proteases," are enzymes that break down proteins into amino acids. These enzymes can break down fibrin, which causes pain and inflammation, thus decreasing pain. When using digestive enzymes for inflammation, they should be taken on an empty stomach.
- Curcumin, the compound that gives turmeric its yellow color, has been found in several studies to reduce inflammation. Enjoy turmeric in a lentil and bean curry, or put a few dashes in your egg or potato salad.
- Omega 3 fatty acids, which can be found in shellfish, avocado and Max EFAs have anti-inflammatory properties and can help ease pain.

BACK PAIN PREVENTION

If you've experienced one episode of back pain, recurrence is very likely. Here are seven tips for decreasing this likelihood:

1. *Stay Lean.* Being overweight can put unnecessary and injury-causing stress and strain on your back, says Lopez. Aim for a body mass index (BMI) of 18.5-24.9 to reduce stress on disks, ligaments and back joints. Calculate your BMI at <http://www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi/>



2. *Work Your Core.* Developing the deep internal muscles of the abdomen, back and pelvis will help to stabilize the body and prevent back pain. The abdominal crunch is a classic core strengthening exercise. To do it, lie on your back, placing your feet on a wall, with knees bent at a 90-degree angle. Tighten your abdominal muscles, cross your arms on your chest, and raise your head and shoulders off the floor. Hold for three deep breaths, return to start position and repeat.
3. *Stop Smoking.* Smoking may not directly cause back pain, but it blocks the blood flow to spinal disks, causing them to age faster than normal. And repeated coughing due to heavy smoking may contribute to back pain. Visit www.cancer.org/smokeout for tips to help you quit for good.
4. *Stretch It Out.* Sitting for long periods of time can compress your back's disks, leading to pain. If you have a job that requires a lot of sitting, try to get up every 30-60 minutes to stretch out. Clasp your hands behind your back, look up at the ceiling, and arch backward. When you sit, cushion your lumbar spine to maintain the normal curvature by scooting to the back of the chair and using a lumbar pillow or even a roll of paper toweling behind your waist for support.
5. *Don't Be a Weekend Warrior.* People who go out and exercise a lot after being inactive all week are more likely to suffer a back injury than those who exercise moderately most days of the week. Aim for a power walk at least 5 out of 7 days.
6. *See a Spine Specialist.* A spine specialist can help you to take charge of back pain by pinpointing the problem and helping you with strengthening and conditioning exercises to eliminate the pain. To find a non-operative spine specialist, visit the American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at www.aapmr.org.
7. *Practice Good Mechanics.* People who are active in sports, especially competitive sports, are at higher risk for back injuries, so it's important to know the proper mechanics of any activity you're doing. Work with a personal trainer if necessary to develop good habits. **MS&F**