

THE BEST WAY TO CARE FOR YOUR BACK PAIN

Understanding the best way for people to care for their back pain is the key to their recovery. People with back pain often have many questions about the most effective treatments and how they can help themselves. There are a lot of confusing messages about how to care for back pain. Some of these are informed and reinforced by societal beliefs, friends and health care professionals. Below are some of the common questions that people with chronic low back pain asked us about how to care for their back pain. Our responses are based on the latest research evidence.



Do I need a lot of treatment for my back pain?

There are many treatments offered for people with low back pain. Most treatments have limited benefits and having a lot of treatment, especially when administered passively (without the person's active participation and control), can be ineffective and unhelpful in the long term. The best treatments involve guiding people to care for their own back. This includes:

- helping people understand the unique factors underlying their pain and building a positive mindset around their pain and future recovery,
- helping people become aware of their body, including how to relax it and control it in ways that reduce pain, build confidence, strength, and fitness,
- providing a road map for recovery linked to the person's goals, and
- coaching them to get physically active and adopt a healthy lifestyle.

This pathway to recovery is different for everyone. For some people it can be relatively quick, while for others it can be long tough journey. Having a trusted team of clinicians to support this process is key. When the problem is complex the team may involve other health care professionals such as a psychologist.



Is there a cure for my chronic lower back pain?

Research has shown that there are effective treatments for people with chronic low back, even when it is severe, distressing and has gone on for a long time. There are a range of outcomes for people who say they have recovered from chronic low back pain. These include reductions in pain, more sense of control over pain, greater ability to do the things in life that they value, and improved quality of life. Some people report that they no longer have back pain, although it may emerge at times when they are stressed, inactive, and run down. The key is that they know how to respond to it. For others their pain may be more persistent, although they say the key is that they know how to manage it, so that it is less bothersome and doesn't restrict their lives.

Are movements and activities that provoke my back pain a sign I am doing damage and do I need to avoid them?

It is common that the spine structures become very sensitive to simple spinal movements (such as bending and twisting), as well as activities of daily living (such as sleeping, sitting, standing, dressing, physical activity, and work). Movement and exercise are one of the most effective ways to help treat back pain and it is important to know that feeling some pain when you start to move and exercise is safe and normal. Feeling pain during normal movement and activities is usually a reflection of how sensitive your spine structures are, rather than of damage. This pain normally settles down with time as you relax and continue to gradually get more active.



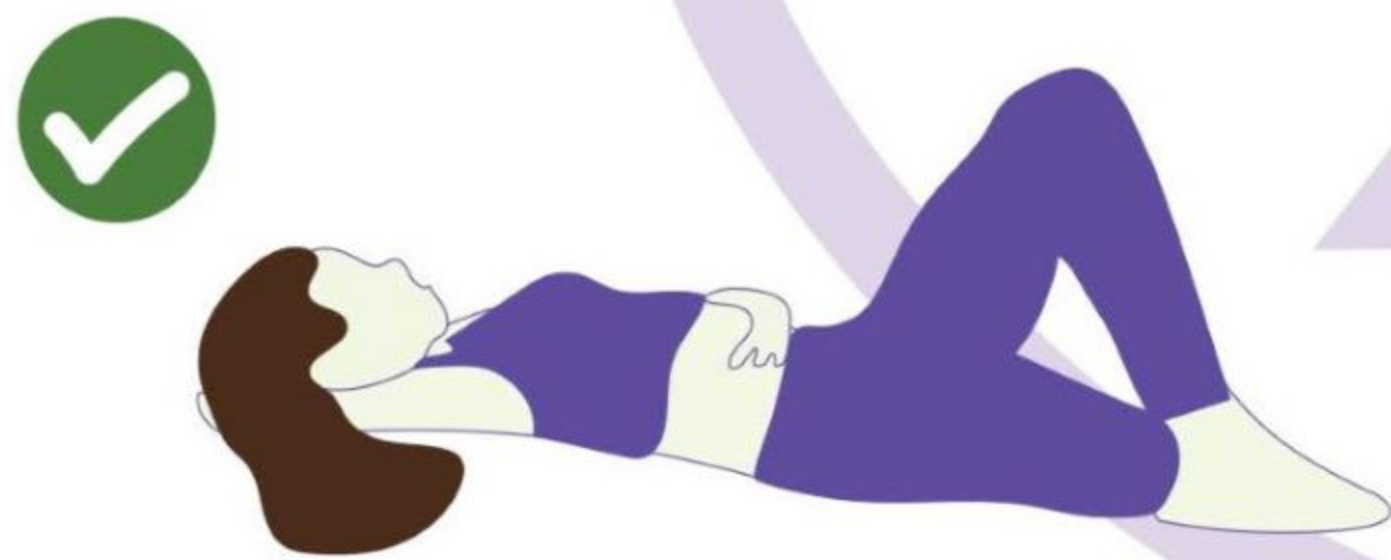
Is it dangerous to bend and lift with a round back?

There is a widespread belief that bending and lifting with a round back is dangerous for the back. However, there is no evidence to support this view. It is safe and healthy to bend and lift in a variety of spine postures (including with a round back) as long as you are fit and strong for the task. Many of the strongest people in the world lift very heavy weights safely in a variety of different postures, including with a rounded back.



Is holding 'good' posture important for my back pain?

Although there is a common view that we need to sit and stand with a straight back to protect the back, the research shows us that there is no 'perfect' posture to prevent or treat back pain. Our backs come in all shapes and sizes. In fact, varying your spine posture throughout the day is healthy for the back. While sitting, standing, and bending are common activities that aggravate back pain, it is safe and often more comfortable to relax while sitting, standing, and bending, rather than tensing and overprotecting the back.



Do I need to tense my core to protect my back?

There is no evidence that consciously tensing the core muscles guards against back pain. In fact, people with back pain often tense their 'core muscles' as a protective response to pain. This is like clenching your fist when you have a sore wrist - it loads the back, makes it stiff, and can cause more pain. Having a strong core is healthy, but tensing the core all the time isn't beneficial. Learning to relax the 'core' muscles when they aren't needed such as when sleeping, sitting, standing, and bending can be helpful. Not consciously tensing the core doesn't mean the muscles aren't working - they are designed to work without us thinking about them.

Will I wear my back out with loading, bending and twisting?

Moving and loading the back actually makes the back structures stronger and healthier. The key is to gradually increase your fitness and capacity over time rather than doing too much too quickly - much like you wouldn't run a marathon tomorrow if you hadn't trained for it. So, activities, like running, twisting, bending, and lifting, are safe and beneficial if you start little by little and practice frequently. Inactivity and avoiding movement and loading along with other lifestyle factors, such as carrying too much weight, makes our back unhealthy and more vulnerable to pain with movement and loading.



If my back pain is severe, do I need strong drugs?

There is good evidence that strong drugs such as opioids are not effective for back pain and can result in unhelpful side effects. Long term opioid use can actually make the nervous system more sensitive, and back pain worse. Importantly, coming off opioids needs to occur gradually with the support of a health care practitioner. Other strategies such as heat, relaxation techniques and gentle movement and exercise are effective forms of pain relief. While there is evidence that some medications such as anti-inflammatories may be beneficial, research shows that regular physical activity just as effective without negative side effects.



If my back pain hasn't improved with lots of treatment does that mean I need surgery?

Spine surgery is helpful when there is a nerve that is compressed in the back resulting in a loss of muscle strength and/or bladder and bowel control. In the absence of serious pathology, surgery isn't necessary or important for back pain. Research shows that spine fusions and disc replacement surgery is no more effective than non-surgical treatments in the long term. Spine surgery also comes with significant risk of complications. Finding low-risk ways to put you in control of your back pain is key.

