

Low Back Pain

About 57 percent of American women and 53 percent of men will suffer at least one bad backache this year.

At least 70 million people this year will have low back pain severe enough to seek professional treatment.

Low back pain accounts for a fourth of America's lost workdays. Low back pain is estimated to cost 15-20 billion dollars a year in lost earnings and doctor bills.

At some time during our lives 80 percent of us can expect to have "bad backs."

There's really nothing new about backaches. In fact, the potential for back troubles would almost seem to be built into the spine. As intricate and magnificent an engineering design as our spine is, it is still better suited for a horizontal position than a vertical one. When humans stand erect, the downward pull of gravity causes pressure and wear-and-tear on the vertebrae and discs separating them. It also strains the back's abdominal muscles and the ligaments that hold the spine in position.

But we can't just blame gravity – we are primarily responsible for our back troubles. Most of us don't get the proper physical conditioning for our spines. Too often, we exercise erratically (if at all) and without proper warm-up. We gain too much weight and sometimes develop potbellies and swaybacks that put added strain on our backs. We sprawl on soft chairs and sofas. We subject our backs to unnecessary pressures, twists, and jolts by bending and lifting things improperly.

Thus, we injure weakened back muscles and sometimes throw off the spinal alignment. Severe stress can cause the actual tearing of muscles or ligaments, causing instant, acute pain. Even more frequent is muscle spasm, which may "lock up" the back and produce agonizing pain. Emotional stress, with its muscle tension, also causes spasms in the back.

What Causes Low Back Pain?

Doctors of Chiropractic will tell you that the most common causes of low back pain – among more than 100 identified – are muscle and ligament injuries, injuries to facet joints, disc problems, and "vertebral subluxation" (defined as "an abnormal function in a spinal joint with neurological and vascular involvement and often a structural displacement of a vertebra").

Facet joints help connect the vertebrae to each other, allowing the spine to move easily while keeping it from bending too much. Facet joint problems occur when the

facets grind against each other or when they produce bony spurs, irritating nerves and causing pain.

"Slipped disc" is a misnomer for the "degenerative disc" condition we all face sooner or later. Spinal discs are positioned between vertebrae and provide cushioning shocks when we bend, twist, or receive a jolt. But gravity, aging, and wear-and-tear, may rob discs of some of their elasticity, causing them to become weaker to partially collapse or bulge out, impinging upon a nerve root. In a very few cases they rupture.

Subluxations are spinal joints that don't move properly within their normal range of motion or are out of alignment.

How Is Back Pain Diagnosed and Treated?

The specialized training and clinical experience of Doctors of Chiropractic qualify them to conduct a sharply focused physical examination that may include orthopedic and neurological tests, posture and gait analysis, static and motion palpation (examination by touch), and x-ray studies. This thorough chiropractic examination enables the doctor to provide a differential diagnosis, pinpoint the abnormalities causing the pain, and develop a blueprint for treatment.

Relieving the immediate pain is the first goal of chiropractic treatment. The second objective is to correct and normalize spinal segment relationships and thus relieve the resulting nerve, muscular, and vascular disturbance. A third goal is to help prevent recurrence.

Doctors of Chiropractic use a unique type of spinal manipulation or adjustment as their primary treatment method. These precise, delicate maneuvers require a great deal of skill, training, and experience, and should only be performed by highly trained professionals. And spinal manipulation has proved effective in numerous scientific studies. In fact, spinal manipulation has even been recommended as a first line of treatment for acute low back pain by the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, an arm of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Using Your Back Wisely

When Standing – maintain a natural "pelvic tilt" posture with your head up, your back straight but relaxed (not ramrod), shoulders even, stomach tightened, buttocks tucked under, and knees slightly flexed. If you are standing for a long time, rest one foot on a box or step to prevent your lower back from sagging.

When Sitting – avoid low, soft chairs and sofas. Choose a chair that is fairly straight, supports the small of your back, and puts your knees slightly lower than your hips. An armchair allows you to rest your arms, which will take additional pressure off the muscles of your back.

A specially designed backrest with lumbar support for your low-back region may be needed. A pillow above your buttocks also works. A small footrest that boosts your knees higher than your hips is helpful. When driving, move the car seat forward to accomplish this.

When Bending or Lifting – NEVER bend from the waist with locked knees. If you want to reach something on or near the floor, flex your knees and squat down slowly. Keep your back as straight and natural as possible. To lift something, squat down as close to the object as possible, grasp it firmly, and rise up slowly, letting your leg muscles (not your back) do the work.

When Playing – strengthen your back muscles with sports that call for endurance and provide conditioning, such as walking, bicycling, and most styles of swimming. Without proper conditioning and warm-ups however, some sports such as some weight-lifting activities, “rotation sports” such as tennis and golf, and back-arching sports like basketball and some swimming strokes can stress the spine.

When Lying Down – though a recliner or contour chair that puts your knees higher than your hips can be relaxing, if you have a backache, this can make it worse. Lying on the floor with knees flexed and a cushion under the head is great for the back.

Most mattresses work well, as long as they don’t sag. The best positions for your back are on your side with knees slightly flexed or on your back, preferably with a pillow to elevate your knees. Sleeping on your stomach is not good for your back.