Low Back Pain

Take Control, Live Better
Your back is the whole area from your neck to your tailbone. It includes the bones (vertebrae) and joints of the spine, the spinal discs that separate and cushion the bones, and the muscles and ligaments that hold them all together. You can stress or hurt any of these parts of your back.

Low back pain can affect the back anywhere below the ribs and above the legs. The lower back, called the lumbar or lumbosacral region, is the connection between the upper and lower body. It bears most of the body’s weight. Because of these roles, it is easily injured when you lift, reach, or twist.

Almost everyone has low back pain at one time or another.
Common causes of back pain

What causes most back pain?

- **Overuse injuries** are caused by repeating movements or staying too long in positions that strain the back.

- **Sudden injuries** are caused by moving suddenly or awkwardly in ways that twist the back.

These kinds of movements or postures can strain or sprain ligaments, muscles, or the joints between the spine and the pelvic bones (sacroiliac joints).

You can hurt a disc in your back the same way, causing it to bulge or tear (rupture). This is called a **herniated disc**. If the tear is large enough, the gel inside the disc may leak out and press against a nerve.

A sprain or strain often causes 2 to 3 days of pain and swelling, followed by slow healing and a gradual decrease in pain. Pain from a herniated disc may last longer. You may feel the pain in your low back, in one buttock, or down one leg.

With good self-care, most of these back injuries will heal in 6 to 12 weeks. Home treatment can help relieve pain, promote healing, and prevent reinjury.

Back pain can also be caused by problems that affect the bones and joints of the spine. Some of these develop as you get older.

For example:

- **Arthritis** pain may be a steady ache, unlike the sharp, sudden pain of back strain and disc injuries.

- **Osteoporosis** can weaken the bones of the spine and cause them to break or collapse.

- **Spinal stenosis** is a narrowing of the spinal canal. This narrowing can squeeze and irritate the nerves that branch out from the spinal cord or can irritate the spinal cord itself. This may cause pain, numbness, or weakness, most often in the legs, feet, and buttocks.

A bulging (herniated) disc can press on a nerve, causing pain.

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**Did You Know?**

**Sciatica** is an irritation of the sciatic nerve, which is formed by the nerve roots that come out of the spinal cord into the lower back. The nerve extends down through the buttock to the foot. Sciatica can occur when a damaged disc presses against a nerve root.

The main symptom is pain, numbness, or weakness that extends from your buttock down your leg.

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[Diagram showing healthy nerve, healthy disc, herniated disc, compressed nerve]
First Aid for Back Pain

**Keep moving**

If you can, walk for 10 to 20 minutes at a time every 2 to 3 hours. Walk on level surfaces, not on hills or stairs. Walk quickly if you can, and swing your arms as you walk.

Lying down for too long can make back pain worse. Sitting can make it worse too. Change positions every 30 minutes. If you must sit for long periods of time, take breaks. Get up and walk around, or lie flat to gently stretch your back.

**Use ice and heat**

Put an ice pack or heating pad on your back every 2 to 3 hours (use ice for 10 to 15 minutes, heat for 15 to 20 minutes). Use whichever works for you. Or switch back and forth between ice and heat. If you use ice, put a thin cloth between the ice and your skin.

**Medicine for pain**

Pain medicine can help you recover from low back pain. For best results:

- Learn what the risks and side effects are before you take any pain medicine.
- Take pain medicine soon after the pain starts, on a regular schedule. Follow the instructions on the label.
- Don’t take more than one kind of medicine unless your doctor has told you to.

For most low back pain, you can take over-the-counter pain medicine such as acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), or naproxen (Aleve).
If you have been prescribed a muscle relaxant or an opiate for severe pain, carefully follow your doctor’s advice.

**Movement tips**

- When a movement hurts, go gently.
- When moving into a lying-down position, keep your back straight.
- Don’t sit up to read or watch TV in bed. Use your bed only for lying down.
- Sit on firm seating. Look for chairs with armrests for lowering and raising yourself.
- When you first get up in the morning, wait 40 to 60 minutes before doing any vigorous exercises.

Most of the time you’ll be able to handle low back pain at home. But there may be times when you need to call your doctor, or even 911.

**When to call the doctor**

**Call 911 if:**

- Back pain occurs with chest pain or other symptoms of a heart attack.
- A person has signs of damage to the spine after an injury (such as a car accident, fall, or direct blow to the spine). Signs may include:
  - Being unable to move part of the body.
  - Severe back or neck pain.
  - Weakness, tingling, or numbness in the arms or legs.

- You cannot walk or stand at all because of weakness, and not just because it hurts too much.

**Call the doctor if:**

- You suddenly lose bowel or bladder control.
- You have new numbness in the buttocks, genital or rectal area, or legs.
- You have leg weakness that is not solely due to pain. Many people with low back pain say their legs feel weak. See your doctor if your leg is so weak that you cannot bend your foot upward, get out of a chair, or climb stairs.
- You have new or increased back pain with fever, painful urination, or other signs of a urinary tract infection.
- You have long-term back pain that suddenly gets much worse, and you did not cause it by being more active.
- You have a history of cancer or HIV infection, and you have new or increased back pain.
- You have severe pain that does not improve after a few days of home treatment.
- Pain wakes you from sleep.
- Pain does not improve after 2 weeks of home treatment.

**Did You Know?**

Even though you hurt, **bed rest is not best.** Walking, stretching, and exercises can help you get better and may prevent future problems. Just go slow and try not to overdo it.
Do you need tests?

How long has your back been hurting? Whether you’ve had back pain for a few weeks or you have pain that recently came back or that just comes and goes, it’s normal to feel like you need to know what’s causing it.

If your back pain has lasted for less than 6 weeks, your doctor may hold off on testing. This is because most back pain goes away on its own in a month or so.

But if you have a back pain problem that has lasted longer than 6 weeks, or if your doctor thinks it may be more than muscle pain, it might be time for a test.

Which tests are used?

Tests for low back pain include:

- X-rays.
- MRIs.
- CT scans.

Sometimes other tests are useful, such as a bone scan or electromyogram and nerve conduction. These are used to look for bone, nerve, and muscle/nerve problems that might be causing low back pain.
Almost everyone has low back pain at some time. The good news is that most low back pain will go away in a few days or weeks with some basic self-care.

Some people are afraid that doing too much may make their pain worse. In the past, people stayed in bed, thinking this would help their backs. Now doctors think that, in most cases, getting back to your normal activities is good for your back, as long as you avoid things that make your pain worse.

Ease back into your daily activities

- For the first day or two of pain, take it easy. But as soon as possible, get back to your normal daily life and activities.

- Movement helps your muscles stay strong. Staying in bed for more than 1 or 2 days can make your problem worse.

- If you are an athlete, return to your activity carefully. Choose a low-impact option until your pain is under control.

Avoid or change activities that cause pain

- Try to avoid bending, lifting, or reaching. These movements put extra stress on your back.

- In bed, try lying on your side with a pillow between your knees. Or lie on your back on the floor with a pillow under your knees.

- When you sit, place a small pillow, a rolled-up towel, or a lumbar roll in the curve of your back for extra support.
When you brush your teeth, put one foot on a stool.

Do not bend over when you put on pants or stockings. Instead, stand with your back against a wall. Then slide your shoulders down the wall and bring your knee up. Gently step into your pants or stockings, one leg at a time.

Pay attention to your body mechanics and posture

Body mechanics are the way you use your body. Posture is the way you sit or stand.

To prevent a return of low back pain, you will need to take extra care when you lift. When you must lift, bend your knees, and flex from your hips. Do not let your spine slump.

Stand or sit tall without slumping or arching your back too much. Slouching and slumping increase stress on your back.

Build a healthy back

Whether you have back pain now or are trying to avoid having it again, the keys to a healthy back are the same:

Use your body in ways that reduce stress on your back.

Stretch and strengthen your back.

Practice good health habits. These include getting regular exercise, staying at a healthy weight, and not smoking.

Back Pain and Smoking

People who smoke take longer to heal—from any injury, not just back pain. If you stop smoking, you may feel better sooner.

People who smoke are also much more likely to have back pain than people who don’t smoke. This is because the nicotine and other toxins from smoking can keep spinal discs from getting all the nutrients they need from the blood, making disc injury more likely. These discs cushion the bones in your spine. An injured disc can cause low back pain.
Exercises for Your Back

Although there is no proof that specific exercises can help prevent back pain, the exercises described here are a common, practical way to help you stay strong and flexible. You may want to make them part of your regular fitness routine.

Do not do these exercises if you have just hurt your back. Instead, see First Aid for Back Pain on page 4.

You do not need to do every exercise. Do the ones that help you the most. Start each exercise slowly. Ease off the exercise if you start to have pain. Don’t do any exercise that makes the pain spread into your buttocks or legs, either during or after the exercise.

### Curl-ups

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor.
2. Cross your arms over your chest. If this bothers your neck, try putting your hands behind your neck (not your head), with your elbows spread apart.
3. Slowly tighten your belly muscles and raise your shoulder blades off the floor.
4. Keep your head in line with your body—don’t press your chin to your chest.
5. Hold this position for 1 or 2 seconds, then slowly lower yourself back down to the floor.
6. Repeat 8 to 12 times.

### Pelvic tilt exercise

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent.
2. “Brace” your stomach—tighten your muscles by pulling in and imagining your belly button moving toward your spine.
3. Press your lower back into the floor. You should feel your hips and pelvis rock back.
4. Hold for 6 seconds while breathing smoothly.
5. Relax and allow your pelvis and hips to rock forward.
6. Repeat 8 to 12 times.

### Press-up

1. Lie on your stomach, supporting your body with your forearms.
2. Press your elbows down into the floor to raise your upper back. As you do this, relax your stomach muscles and allow your back to arch without using your back muscles. As you press up, do not let your hips or pelvis come off the floor.
3. Hold for at least 15 to 30 seconds, then relax.
4. Repeat 2 to 4 times.
### Knee-to-chest exercise

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. You can put a small pillow under your head and neck if it is more comfortable.
2. Bring one knee to your chest, keeping the other foot flat on the floor.
3. Keep your lower back pressed to the floor. Hold for at least 15 to 30 seconds.
4. Relax, and lower the knee to the starting position.
5. Repeat with the other leg. Repeat 2 to 4 times with each leg.
6. To get more stretch, put your other leg flat on the floor while pulling your knee to your chest.

### Alternate arm and leg (bird dog) exercise

1. Start on the floor, on your hands and knees.
2. Tighten your belly muscles.
3. Raise one leg off the floor, and hold it straight out behind you. Be careful not to let your hip drop down, because that will twist your trunk.
4. Hold for about 6 seconds, then lower your leg and switch to the other leg.
5. Repeat 8 to 12 times on each leg.
6. Over time, work up to holding for 10 to 30 seconds each time.
7. If you feel stable and secure with your leg raised, try raising the opposite arm straight out in front of you at the same time.

### Bridging

Note: Do this exercise slowly. Try to keep your body straight at all times, and do not let one hip drop lower than the other.
Hamstring wall stretch

1. Lie on your back in a doorway, with one leg through the open door.
2. Slide your other leg up the wall to straighten your knee. You should feel a gentle stretch down the back of your leg.
   - Do not arch your back.
   - Do not bend either knee.
   - Keep one heel touching the floor and the other heel touching the wall. Do not point your toes.
3. Hold the stretch for at least 1 minute to begin. Then try to lengthen the time you hold the stretch to as long as 6 minutes.
4. Repeat 2 to 4 times with each leg.

Hip flexor stretch

1. Kneel on one leg and bend your other leg out in front of you, with that foot flat on the floor. If you feel discomfort in the front of your knee, place a towel under your knee.
2. Keeping your back straight, slowly push your hips forward until you feel a stretch in the upper thigh of your back leg and hip.
3. Hold the stretch for at least 15 to 30 seconds.
4. Repeat 2 to 4 times with each leg.

Back press

1. Place your feet 10 to 12 inches from the wall.
2. Rest your back flat against the wall, and slide down the wall until your knees are slightly bent.
3. Press your lower back against the wall by pulling in your stomach muscles.
4. Hold for about 6 seconds, and then relax your stomach muscles and slide back up the wall.
5. Repeat 8 to 12 times.
The goal of good body mechanics is to sit, stand, sleep, and move in ways that reduce the stress on your back. Use good body mechanics all the time, not just when you have back pain.

**Sitting**

- Try not to sit in the same position for more than an hour at a time. Get up or change positions every 20 to 30 minutes.
- If you work at a desk or computer, set up your workstation to reduce stress on your back and neck.
  - Use a chair that you can adjust and that does not upset the normal curve of your back.

- Keep your feet flat on the floor or on a footrest.
- Keep your screen at or just below eye level so you do not have to tilt your head or look sideways.

- If your chair does not give enough support, use a small pillow or rolled-up towel to support your lower back.
- When you drive, pull your seat forward so that you can easily reach the pedals and steering wheel. Stop often to stretch and walk around. A small pillow or rolled-up towel behind your lower back might help too.
**Lifting**

- Keep your upper back straight. Do not bend forward at the waist.
- Bend your knees, and let your arms and legs do the work. Tighten your buttocks and belly to support your back.
- Keep the load as close to your body as you can, even if the load is light.
- While holding a heavy object, use your feet to turn, not your back. Try not to turn or twist your body.
- Do not lift heavy objects above shoulder level.
- For heavy or awkward items, use a hand truck or ask someone to help you.

**Lying down**

- If you have back pain at night, your mattress may be the problem. Try a firmer mattress. Or if you think your mattress is too firm, try a softer one.
- If you sleep on your back, you may want to use a rolled-up towel to support your lower back or put a pillow under your knees.
- If you sleep on your side, try placing a pillow between your knees.
- Sleeping on your stomach is fine if it does not cause back or neck pain.
A wide range of treatment is available for low back pain, depending on what’s causing the pain and how long it lasts. Most people find that their low back pain improves within a few weeks. Chances are good that your pain will go away soon with some basic self-care. Other treatments can help too.

**Physical therapy**

The goal of physical therapy is to make daily tasks and activities easier. For example, it may help with walking, going up stairs, or getting in and out of bed.

First, your physical therapist will try to reduce your pain and swelling. Then he or she will probably work to increase your flexibility, strength, and endurance.

Physical therapy almost always includes exercise. It can include stretching, core exercises, weight lifting, and walking. You may learn an exercise program so you can do it at home.

Your physical therapist also may use manual therapy (such as massage or spinal manipulation), education, and techniques such as heat, cold, water, ultrasound, and electrical stimulation.

**Spinal manipulation**

Spinal manipulation helps relieve short-term low back pain for many people. It doesn’t work for everyone.

Manipulation can be done with the hands or a special device. The careful, controlled force used on the joint can range from gentle to strong, and from slow to rapid.
If you have tight muscles or muscles that spasm, your practitioner may first use heat, ultrasound, or an electrical current to relax your muscles before manipulating the spine.

There are many types of practitioners who use spinal manipulation, such as chiropractors, osteopathic physicians, physical therapists, and physiatrists.

**Surgery**

When you’re in a lot of pain, you might wonder if you need surgery to fix what’s wrong so that you can feel better.

Every case is different. But most people don’t need surgery for low back pain.

Most back surgeries are done to treat nerve pain from herniated discs.

- Most herniated discs heal and pain eases after a few weeks or months of treatment.
- About half of people with herniated discs get better within a month without surgery.
- After 6 months, most people with herniated discs have recovered. Only about 10 out of 100 people end up needing surgery.

**When surgery may help**

Surgery might be an option when a disc problem causes pain in your leg that prevents you from doing everyday tasks. You may have pain, numbness, or tingling through one buttock and down the back of one leg (sciatica) or in the front of your thigh. Other problems that may require surgery include:

- A spinal fracture caused by an injury.
- An infection in your spine.
- A problem that causes your spine to be unstable.
- A tumor in your spine.
- Spinal stenosis.
- Loss of feeling or weakness in your back or legs that gets worse over time.
- Loss of control of your bowel or bladder.

Having surgery for a herniated disc or another back problem is a big decision. Talk to your doctor about it.

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**Did You Know?**

For some people who have low back pain, acupunctur **e** may help decrease pain and increase activity. Acupuncture is a form of Chinese medicine based on the theory that energy, called chi (say “chee”), flows through and around your body along pathways called meridians.

Acupuncture is done by putting very thin needles into your skin at certain points on your body. This is done to influence the energy flow. Sometimes heat, pressure, or a mild electrical current is used along with needles.
Managing Pain

Low back pain can take a toll on your mental health. You may feel fear, frustration, and anger or have depression and anxiety because of ongoing pain. Those common reactions can make your pain last even longer. If pain is starting to get you down:

- Let people know when you need a helping hand. Ask family members or friends to help out with physical tasks you can’t do right now.
- Be honest with your doctor about how pain is affecting you. Ask for a referral to a counselor or pain management specialist. Your doctor may also see a need to prescribe antianxiety or antidepressant medicine.
- Work with your health professionals and your work supervisor to make a return-to-work plan, if necessary. Ask for an ergonomic consultation if you need to learn how to do some of your job duties differently to avoid hurting your back again.

Treatment for pain

The best way to control your pain is to follow your treatment plan and give it time to work.

Some treatments may take a few days or weeks to improve your pain. You and your doctor can talk about how long you should stay on a medicine or other treatment.

It’s very important to take your medicines exactly as your doctor prescribes. Following your doctor’s advice will help you get the right amount of medicine with as few side effects as possible.
It’ll also help you and your doctor know if a medicine is working for you. Make sure to tell your doctor about any medicines or herbal supplements you take. Your other medicines and supplements could mix in a bad way with your pain medicines. This could keep the pain medicine from working as well as it could.

**Don’t wait for pain to get bad**

Make the most of your pain medicines by following these rules:

- Take them on time (by the clock).
- Do not skip a dose or wait until you think you need it.
- Be prepared for breakthrough pain. You may find that taking your medicine works most of the time but that your pain flares up during extra activity or even for no clear reason. These flare-ups are called breakthrough pain. Your doctor can give you a prescription for fast-acting medicines that you can take for breakthrough pain.

- If you have more than one doctor, pick one doctor to be in charge of all your medicines. If more than one doctor prescribes pain medicine, make sure they talk to each other about it.

**Keep a pain diary**

A pain diary may help you and your doctor find out what makes your pain better or worse. Use the diary and pain scale on this page to keep track of when you have pain, how bad it is, and what you are doing to treat it.

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**Pain Diary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAIN SCALE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>No pain</td>
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</table>

| Date, time: |
| Pain scale rating: |
| Medicine and dose: |
| Medicine side effects: |
| What made the pain better today? |
| What made the pain worse today? |
### Ways to Perform Daily Tasks With Less Pain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Tips</th>
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</table>
| **Housecleaning**           | ▶ Don’t strain to reach. Try using a damp cloth on the end of a broomstick to reach low places. Or buy mops and other tools that have expandable arms.  
▶ Instead of pushing and pulling the vacuum back and forth, walk it all the way across the room and back. Stand up straight as you move. |
| **Using the phone**         | ▶ Don’t cradle the phone between your ear and your shoulder, not even for a little while. If you can’t hold on to the phone because you’re doing something with your hands, hang up and call back later. Or buy a hands-free phone. |
| **Driving the car**         | ▶ When you get in, sit first and then turn so that you bring both legs into the car together. When you get out, do the reverse.  
▶ Pull your seat forward so that you can comfortably reach the pedals and the steering wheel. Your knees should be bent so that you don’t have to lift your whole leg to step on the brake.  
▶ You may find driving more comfortable with a small pillow or rolled-up towel behind your lower back. |
| **In the bathroom**         | ▶ Support bars in the bathtub and around the toilet can help you put less strain on your back as you get in and out or up and down.  
▶ Women can put a small stool in the shower so they have somewhere to put their feet when shaving their legs. |
| **Washing dishes or ironing** | ▶ For chores that require you to stand in one place, you might feel better with one foot slightly higher than the other. While doing dishes, open the cupboard below and place your foot on the ledge. While ironing, stack one or two books on the floor and put one foot on them. Remember to squat when putting those books on the floor! |
| **Picking up children**     | ▶ Try to avoid picking up children while you’re standing up. If you must, remember to lift properly.  
▶ Better yet, find a place to sit down and let the child come into your lap. |
| **Gardening**               | ▶ Many gardening chores usually require bending forward. Whenever you can, sit, squat, or get on your knees instead. |
| **Unloading the groceries** | ▶ Taking in all the groceries at once may save time, but it won’t help your back. Just think of the extra exercise you’ll get by making several trips between the car and the kitchen. |
Stress and Your Back

Stress is what you feel when you have too much to handle. You may have too much work to do, or you may be having trouble with children or a spouse. If stress happens too often or lasts too long, it can affect your health.

We all “hold” stress in different ways. Some people hold stress in their minds. They may worry so much about a problem that they can’t think clearly.

If you hold stress in your body, it can affect your back. You may begin to tense your back muscles, which can trigger low back pain or make it worse.

Stress and low back pain can create a vicious circle. You have back pain, and you begin to worry about it. This causes stress, and your back muscles begin to tense. Tense muscles make your back pain worse, and you worry more, which makes your back worse, and so on.

Can you avoid stress?

You’ll always have some stress in your life, but you can try to prevent situations that cause stress and change how stress affects you.

Time management

When you don’t have time, things pile up and stress mounts. Try these tips for managing your time:

▶ Focus on what you are doing. Don’t juggle too many tasks at one time. Break large projects into smaller ones.
▶ Don’t try to do everything yourself. Ask others to help you.
Rate tasks by how important and urgent they are. Spend your time on things that rate high.

Plan your day so you have time for something you want to do.

Don’t put things off. Use the 3 Ds: Deal with it, delegate it, or dump it.

**Lifestyle**

Some behaviors and lifestyle choices can help your body bounce back from stress.

- Get enough sleep. Your body recovers from stress while you are sleeping.
- Eat healthy foods. And when you eat, sit down and relax. Avoid too much caffeine.
- Be active every day. Go for walks, work in the garden, or play with your kids.
- Don’t smoke.

**Get support**

If you have a lot of stress, tell people about it and ask for help. Look for support from:

- Family members and friends.
- People at work or school and people who share your interests.
- Members or leaders of your church or religious group.
- Support groups that focus on special situations, such as giving care to someone who has a long-term illness. You can find these groups in your community or on the Internet.
- Programs offered through your school, community, or job. These could include stress management or time management courses.

**Watch Your Weight**

Extra body weight, especially around the waist, may put strain on your back. If you want to get to a healthy weight and stay there, lifestyle changes will work better than dieting. Here are three steps to reaching a healthy weight:

- **Improve your eating habits.** Do it slowly. You may be tempted to do a diet overhaul and change everything about the way you eat. But you will be more successful at staying with the changes you make if you pick just one eating habit at a time to work on.

- **Get moving.** Try to make physical activity a regular part of your day, just like brushing your teeth. Start small, and build up over time. Moderate activity is safe for most people, but it’s always a good idea to talk to your doctor before you start an exercise program.

- **Change your thinking.** Our thoughts have a lot to do with how we feel and what we do. If you can stop your brain from telling you discouraging things and have it start encouraging you instead, you may be surprised at how much healthier you’ll be—in mind and body.
After you have had low back pain once, you are likely to have it again. To avoid further pain:

- Practice good posture when you sit, stand, and walk.
- Get regular, low-impact exercise. Walk, swim, or ride a stationary bike. Stretch before you exercise.
- If you smoke, try to quit. People who smoke are more likely to have low back pain.
- Wear low-heeled shoes with good support.
- Watch your weight. Being too heavy puts extra stress on your back.
- Don’t try to lift things that are too heavy for you. When you must lift, bend your knees and keep your back straight, keep the object you are lifting close to your belly button, and avoid lifting and twisting at the same time.

If you sit or stand for long periods at work:

- Pay attention to your posture. Sit or stand up straight, with your shoulders back.
- Make sure your chair has good back support.
- Take regular breaks to walk around.

If your work involves a lot of bending, reaching, or lifting:

- Talk to your supervisor to see if there are other ways you can do your work.
- Don’t depend on a “back belt” to protect your back. Studies have not shown these belts to be effective in reducing back injuries. The most they can do is to help remind you to use good techniques for lifting.
### Your Action Plan

Whether you’re trying to get active, change your eating habits, quit smoking, or deal with stress in a healthier way, having a plan can help you succeed. Use this form to write down what you plan to do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1: Make sure it’s something that you really want to do.</th>
<th>Your notes:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you want to achieve? Why is it important to you?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 2: Set your long-term goal.</th>
<th>Long-term goals:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Based on your answers in step 1, set your long-term goal. This is what you want to accomplish overall.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Step 3: Set your short-term goals.</th>
<th>Short-term goals:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Based on your long-term goal, figure out the small steps you can work on each week that will build up to the outcome you want.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 4: Guess your barriers before they happen.</th>
<th>I think my barriers will be: I can get around them by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everyone runs into barriers to their goals. You may already know what’s going to get in your way. Write down these problems (cost? time? fear?), and think of ways to get around them. Use another sheet of paper if you need to.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Step 5: Plan for support and rewards.</th>
<th>I will get support from: My rewards:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who can help you meet your goals? Family? Friends? An online support group? A community support group? And write down some rewards you can give yourself when you meet various goals. Rewards can be anything: a movie, a visit to your favorite restaurant, a new piece of clothing, 1 hour in the day all to yourself.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Just keep moving, even if it’s only a few steps. That’s what Robert learned is a key to helping his low back pain.

Robert has been suffering with low back pain for more than 15 years. There have been several times when his back went out and he couldn’t move off the couch for a while.

But over the years he’s learned that getting active helps. A lot.

The last time his back went out, he went to a friend who is a chiropractor.

“He was really good about getting me to do strengthening exercises for the lower abs and lower back and getting it to the point where I could manage it at home,” Robert, now 45, says.

Robert hasn’t been back to the chiropractor for almost 3 years, not even after he hurt his back mowing the lawn last summer. He was out of commission for a few days, but “I got back into shape within about a week and a half.

“I started out with icing my back and then alternating ice and heat, because that’s what my chiropractor had me do before. Plus I’d do some stretches and some of the exercises that he had given me,” Robert says. “On day three, I started to add some walking and some more exercise into my routine again. And then I really recovered quickly.”

Now Robert is trying to make exercising a daily habit. His goal is to do his exercises every morning before breakfast and to take a half-hour walk every evening. But on the days he just doesn’t feel like it, he doesn’t get mad at himself.

“I think it’s all about taking it one step at a time, one day at a time. If I get up in the morning and I just don’t feel like facing those exercises, I tell myself I’m just going to do one of them and then go down to breakfast. Usually that gets me into the swing of things, and I just keep going until I’ve finished all of them.”

He does the same thing with his evening walk. “Sometimes I just tell myself I only have to walk to the end of the block tonight. I’ll just do as much as I can. And lots of times I just keep going.”
### Action Plan

Work with your doctor to fill out the information below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Doctor’s Phone Number:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctor’s Name:</td>
<td>Other Emergency Contact Numbers:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When should I call my doctor?</td>
<td>Next doctor visit date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call 911 if:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of my medicines:</td>
<td>When to take my medicines:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does my doctor recommend any changes to my medicines?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I need to check or keep track of? (healthy eating, physical activity, weight)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I need to change my diet or activities?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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