

# Low back pain

## What is low back pain?

Low back pain is pain felt in your lower back or lumbar spine. Your lower back is the part of your spine between the bottom of your ribs and the top of your pelvis. This part of your spine is designed to be strong and allows you to turn, twist or bend and to stand, walk and lift.

Most people have pain in their low back at some time in their lives. It will usually get better with time, but it is not uncommon for low back pain to return.

## What causes low back pain?

A specific cause for low back pain cannot be identified most of the time. This does not prevent treatment and recovery.

If you have pain that goes down your leg (called 'sciatica') this can be related to irritation of the nerve that supplies that area. Your doctor can examine you and advise if this is a cause.

Often x-rays and scans show changes such as disc bulges or arthritis. These changes are common as we get older and will also occur in people without any pain. In people with low back pain, x-ray or scan reports will usually not provide a specific explanation for the symptoms and are not always indicated.

## How is low back pain diagnosed?

Very rarely back pain is due to serious causes. In the emergency department one of the most important tasks is to rule out serious causes of low back pain. A doctor will ask you questions about your symptoms and examine you to exclude any concerning features. In most cases, additional investigations such as x-rays and blood tests are not needed, especially if there are no concerning features in your assessment. In these situations, performing tests can sometimes cause more harm than good.

## Treatment

The main goal of treatment is to help you find ways to manage your pain and return to your usual activities. Most cases of low back pain will usually get better with simple treatment and time. Often low back pain is best managed at home provided you have someone to help you to perform your daily functions.

The key points to remember are:

- Bed rest is not recommended and can make things worse

- Gradually return to your usual activities as soon as possible. It is important to keep moving with activities such as walking as much as your pain allows. Staying active helps recovery and to prevent long-term problems.
- You may need to use pain-relieving medicines to help you stay active. Your doctor will advise you about the best options for your condition. It is usually best to take them regularly initially to allow gradual return to your normal activities.
- If you are working, a program of modified duties or reduced hours of work may be needed for a short period. This applies to work at home as well.

Patients with certain conditions may be referred to see a specialist such as an orthopaedic surgeon or neurosurgeon for further assessment or treatment. This may include injections or, in some cases, surgery. Most of the time, surgery is not required. A physiotherapist can assist with exercises, advice and treatment to help with your current pain as well as prevent any future back pain.

## Home care

- Concentrate on managing your pain and staying active
- Change positions regularly. It is fine to sit, stand or walk as much as comfortable, but you may initially find it difficult to tolerate any one position for long periods of time.
- Keep moving. Walk as much as you can and gradually increase the distance. Initially you may need crutches or a walking frame. As pain allows, return to your normal activities, including school and work.
- A heat-pack can help relax your back muscles and decrease the pain. It can be applied for up to 20 minutes every hour, as needed. Check your skin after five minutes; if a rash or irritation occurs, remove the heat pack.
- Take pain medications as advised by your doctor. These may include paracetamol or ibuprofen. You may be given stronger pain medications for a short time to help you get moving. These are usually only used for the first few days and then you may be changed to another medication. Avoid driving a car or operating machinery if the pain medication makes you drowsy.
- Physiotherapy can assist in providing you with advice, treatment and exercises to help your recovery and prevent reoccurrence of your pain

### How can I prevent back pain?

There are a number of lifestyle factors that can contribute to low back pain. These include being overweight, lack of physical activity, smoking, poor sleep and stress. Addressing these factors can help prevent further episodes of back pain.

### Seeking help

**Cabrini Emergency Department (ED)** is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

#### Return to Cabrini ED if you have:

- **Alteration of bowel or bladder function, especially inability to pass urine or bowel movements**
- **Altered sensation in the 'saddle' region (the bottom and between your legs)**
- **Significant loss of power or altered feeling in your legs**
- **Significant worsening of your symptoms**

### Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)