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What causes back pain?

Back pain can often begin without any trauma or specific precipitating event. Some causes of back pain include:

- Muscular strain
- Lumbar disc tear or herniation
- Arthritis/Stenosis
- Scoliosis
- Bone fractures
- Other sources (i.e., hip/pelvis problems)

Check with your doctor before embarking on any new exercise program.

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Back Pain: What We Know and How We Treat at HSS

Back pain is one of the most common medical problems, affecting **80%** of adults at some point in their lives.

What are the symptoms of back pain?

- Back ache or sharp pain
- Pain, numbness or tingling in the leg
- Hip or knee pain

Low back pain may be exacerbated by sitting, bending, standing or walking. Dr. Cooke says that "Understanding and diagnosing back pain requires knowledge of the body's kinetic chain, meaning that a problem in one area of the body can cause symptoms in another area. Defining the source of the pain and its contributing factors is integral to formulating a treatment plan and preventing recurrence." Imaging studies like x-ray or MRI may be useful for diagnosis but are not always necessary.



What can be done to prevent back pain?

POSTURE Awareness of spine posture is key, says Dr. Cooke. "Reducing duration of sitting and total hours sitting per day by getting up and moving at regular intervals is helpful. Improving ergonomics at the worksite can be beneficial as well."

What are the treatments for back pain?

Most back pain improves over time with good conservative care. Often the simple application of ice or heat is useful.

Some of the treatment options for low back pain include:

PHYSICAL THERAPY According to Dr. Paul Cooke, Assistant Attending Physiatrist at Hospital for Special Surgery (HSS), "In many cases, physical therapy can facilitate resolution of the condition. Directed physical activity/exercise can improve symptoms and can get a person back toward their level of activity prior to the pain or injury. Education about home or gym exercises and spine mechanics may help prevent future episodes."

ORAL MEDICATIONS These may be over-the-counter or prescribed. A short course of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication is indicated in some cases.

INJECTIONS Delivery of corticosteroid medication targeted to the pain generator can reduce inflammation and improve low back and leg pain. This can allow for quicker and more productive return to physical activity/exercise.

SURGERY Some cases of back pain may involve neurologic dysfunction such as weakness and numbness. Other cases may not respond to conservative care. Evaluation with a spine surgeon may be appropriate in these situations to determine if the patient is a candidate for surgical intervention.

OTHER TREATMENTS

Acupuncture, chiropractic care and, in some cases, massage can be useful as well.

People with back pain can call the Spine Care Institute Referral Line at 212-606-1776, where they will briefly describe their condition and then be directed to the appropriate spine physician(s) for an initial evaluation; or please call your local physician.

"Our goal is to get patients in to see the right spine practitioner in a timely manner. This way they can get a diagnosis and start on the road to recovery."

—Dr. Paul Cooke

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY An exercise routine, whether at the gym, in exercise classes or on your own, can help with flexibility, cardiovascular health and core muscle strengthening. Wearable activity tracker devices assist many patients in monitoring their physical activity day-to-day. Walking is the most available exercise option for many people so tracking steps is helpful to ensure maximal benefit.

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