



14 Ways to Treat Back Pain

By Chris Woolston

CONSUMER HEALTH INTERACTIVE

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Feeling discouraged about your aching back? Hang in there: Relief may be closer than you think. If you've already been to the doctor but can't seem to get that pain under control, here are 14 tried-and-true ways of coping. One -- or more -- just might be right for you.

1. Get out of bed

It's time to retire one of the age-old remedies for back pain: Lengthy bed rest won't help your back heal. In fact, lying around for longer than a couple of days just might make things worse. After a while, the muscles in the back will start to weaken, setting you up for even more pain. Most doctors recommend limiting bed rest to just a day or two. If lying down doesn't feel good, don't even bother with one day. You have more important things to do -- like get better.

2. Keep moving

Even if your back hurts a little, try to stay somewhat active. You may not be ready to move furniture or play basketball, but you can wash the dishes, walk around the block, or engage in slow, gentle exercises like yoga or t'ai chi. Most people find that regular activity eases their pain and puts them on track for a quicker recovery. One note of caution: If any exercise or activity makes your pain worse, stop doing it immediately.

If you have chronic back pain, your doctor or physical therapist may recommend exercises to increase your flexibility, strengthen your back and abdominal muscles, and improve your posture. These exercises can ease lingering back pain and help prevent future episodes. But if you're struggling with a sudden bout of sharp pain, exercises probably won't help. The Mayo Clinic recommends waiting until such pain subsides before trying exercise to strengthen your back.

3. Avoid strain

As long as your back hurts, avoid any bending, twisting, or heavy lifting. If you do have to lift something, let your legs do the work -- those muscles are much stronger than the ones in your back or arms. Keeping your feet shoulder-width apart, bend at the knees and squat while holding your back straight. When you're level with the object, hold it as close as possible and push up with your legs. Try not to twist while lifting -- it's easy to injure yourself that way. "A lot of people get a minor injury, then turn it into a major injury by straining a sore back," says orthopedic surgeon Bill Cabot of Atlanta.

4. Take two aspirin (and feel better in the morning)

Don't let this drug's unassuming reputation fool you: Aspirin is powerful medicine for back pain. Other over-the-counter pain relievers such as ibuprofen (Advil), naproxen (Aleve), and acetaminophen (Tylenol) can also bring relief. Follow the directions on the bottle and be especially careful not to take more than the recommended dosage. Without a doctor's approval, however, pain relievers shouldn't become a part of your daily routine. If you're still in pain after a week or so, it's time to visit a doctor and find out what's going on.

5. Chill out

According to the Mayo Clinic, a little ice can go a long way toward relieving back pain. You can either buy an icepack or make one by putting some ice cubes in a plastic bag and wrapping it in a towel or cloth. Then put the whole bundle on your sore spot several times a day, for 20 minutes at a time.

Interestingly, even though ice is better for an inflamed back, some back sufferers who favor the use of hot tubs are unaware of ice's healing power. "After a nine-hour car trip in which I sat in a sort of "V" position in the back seat, propping my knees against the seat in front of me, I developed back pain so excruciating that I had to roll to the refrigerator -- I could barely stand up without my back going into spasms," one San Francisco health and medical editor recalls. "After a day of agony I somehow made it to a chiropractor, who told me that my back was too inflamed to work on. But he did give me one incredible tip, which I've never forgotten, and that was to use an icepack. It was the only thing that truly relieved the pain, and after a few more days my back had healed up completely." Ice is especially effective during the first 48 hours after injury, when it brings down swelling.

6. Turn on the heat

Once your back starts to feel better, you can switch from ice to heat. A heating pad can boost circulation to your back and loosen tight muscles. (Keep the heat on the medium setting or lower to avoid burning yourself.) Moist heat is better, Cabot says, but he cautions patients not to wrap a wet towel around a heating pad unless it's a waterproof "moist" heating pad. As with the ice pack, you should limit each session to about 20 minutes.

Chris Studley, a San Francisco stagehand, frequently throws out his back in the same place -- the result of an old injury from his younger days of toiling as a golf caddy. He only recently discovered the power of heat, especially moist heat. On the advice of his health care provider, he boiled some water and soaked a towel in it, then wrapped that towel in another one and laid down on it for 20 minutes of deep, penetrating relief. "I was surprised that I felt that good afterward," he says.

7. Snuff out those cigarettes

Recent studies have uncovered a surprising link between smoking and back pain. For unknown reasons, smokers seem to be especially vulnerable to this type of pain. "It also takes smokers longer to recover from back surgery, although we're not sure why," Cabot says. There's no solid proof that quitting smoking will help relieve the pain, but it's certainly worth a try.

8. Lose weight, if needed

If you're seriously overweight, those extra pounds could be straining your spine. Lose some weight and you just might lose the pain. In contrast, people who are just moderately overweight probably

can't hope to overcome back pain simply by slimming down, says Richard Deyo, M.D., a professor of medicine at the University of Washington. Still, a weight-loss program that includes regular exercise is bound to make your whole body feel better -- no matter what the scale says. Cabot tells his overweight patients to hold a bag filled with 25 pounds of weight out in front of them (like a protruding belly) and carry it around for an hour. "They usually can't make it 15 minutes before their back hurts too badly," Cabot says. "I say, 'Now set the bag down; that's how good you'll feel when you lose your own 25 pounds.'"

9. Relax

The tension and strain of everyday life can go straight to your back. If your back muscles feel tight whenever you're under pressure, you can fight pain by learning to relax. When you feel your blood starting to boil, take a few slow, deep breaths and picture yourself in a quiet, beautiful place. The University of Washington offers these other stress-busting tips for people with back pain: Take warm baths, find a hobby, go on walks with a friend, try to keep a positive outlook, and learn to accept things you can't change. If stress still has a hold on you, consider seeing a counselor or other mental health professional.

10. Perfect your posture

If you tend to slouch, you may be able to relieve pain by improving your posture. When sitting, keep your back straight and shoulders relaxed. Your feet should be flat on the floor, and your knees should be in line with your hips. When standing, keep your back straight, your chest forward, and your head up. Try to put equal weight on each foot. Lumbar pillows in your office chair also help keep your lower back in line.

Chris Studley, the Bay Area stagehand, recently discovered what a difference good posture can make. "I've had lower back pain all my life, so much so that sometimes I can't get out of bed or I walk around like an old man for a couple of days," he says. These days, however, he can avoid most problems if he keeps his chin up (literally), and supports his lower back by drawing in his abdominal muscles, especially when lifting anything.

11. Good night, sleep right

Nighttime is the right time to give your back the support -- and the rest -- it needs. While the old philosophy was that a firmer mattress is better, Cabot says doctors today recommend that you sleep on whatever type is comfortable for you. "Take your mattress for a test drive," says Cabot. "Go to a department store and lie on one for an hour if you have to; just find what works for you." You might also try sleeping on your side with your legs slightly bent. If you prefer to sleep on your back, ask your doctor if it's a good idea to put pillows under your knees.

12. Invest in a massage

Besides relaxing you mentally and physically, massage may release endorphins, the body's natural painkillers. And recent studies suggest what some people have experienced firsthand: Massage can help relieve persistent back pain. A randomized controlled study in the Archives of Internal Medicine showed that massage substantially relieved lower back pain among people suffering moderately severe chronic pain. After 10 one-hour sessions of massage (spread out over a 10-week period) participants reported less pain and disability than the control groups; in fact, bothersome symptoms dropped by nearly 50 percent -- an improvement that the researchers found still true a year after their last massage. "The results of this study suggest that massage is an effective short-term treatment for chronic low back pain, with benefits that persist for at least 1 year," the study's authors reported. What more motivation do you need to treat yourself to a massage?

13. Examine your emotional health

Some studies have shown that chronic back pain is linked to tension and stress, perhaps brought on by repressed anxiety or anger. Back pain symptoms can be treated by medicine or surgery, the theory goes, but the real underlying cause of that pain -- stress and hidden anger -- may rarely be

recognized or dealt with. In his book *Healing Back Pain: The Mind-Body Connection*, John Sarno, M.D., professor of clinical rehabilitation medicine at New York University School of Medicine, asserts that tension and repressed anger affect blood circulation, depriving muscles and other tissues of their normal supply of oxygen and causing pain. This condition -- though often acutely painful -- is essentially harmless and curable by treating the underlying source of nervous tension, according to Sarno. Think hard: Is something weighing you down?

14. Trust in teamwork

Not everyone can tackle back pain alone. If your pain doesn't show any signs of improving within three days, or if it lingers for a week or more, it's time to see a physician. Whether you are referred to a specialist or a chiropractor, each will try to find the source of your pain and plan a course of action. The American College of Physicians and the American Pain Society issued clinical guidelines for the treatment of back pain in 2007. The best course of treatment will depend on the root cause of your pain. Make sure you understand your options and make an educated choice.

-- Chris Woolston is a contributing editor at Consumer Health Interactive. He was a staff writer for *Hippocrates*, a national magazine for physicians, and has also written for WebMD, *Health*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and other publications.

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