A resource for patients

Eighty to 90 percent of people in the United States will suffer from back pain at some time during their lives. Back pain is the second most common reason people visit their family doctors. On any given day, almost 2 percent of the entire United States workforce is disabled by back pain. It is the cause of enormous healthcare expenditures.

Each year, patients from around the world turn to Cleveland Clinic for specialized treatment of spinal disorders. Together, our Neurological Institute’s Center for Spine Health and Anesthesiology Institute’s Department of Pain Management provide relief to more than 27,000 adults annually — for conditions ranging from common complaints such as low back pain to complex conditions like spinal deformities.

Specialists in both areas are dedicated to restoring function and relieving your pain to the maximum extent possible. Whether your goal is getting back to sports, work or hobbies, or just enjoying life, Cleveland Clinic spine and pain management specialists can help.

Cleveland Clinic’s Center for Spine Health is part of our Neurological Institute, whose neurology and neurosurgery program is top-ranked in Ohio and among the top 10 in the nation, according to U.S. News & World Report’s “Best Hospitals” survey.

USING THIS GUIDE

Please refer to this guide as you examine your treatment options. Remember, it is your right as a patient to ask questions and seek a second opinion.
When to see a back pain specialist

Many back disorders can be evaluated and treated successfully by a primary care doctor. However, for severe or persistent pain, evaluation by a medical spine or pain management specialist is recommended. Warning signs that should prompt urgent medical evaluation include the presence of fever, worsening pain, progressive movement of the pain from the back into the leg, numbness in the area of the injury or down the leg, presence of a lump or area with an unusual shape, and pain that is unrelieved at rest or disturbs sleep.

What are the types of back pain?

THE MOST COMMON TYPES ARE:

**Acute back pain** – A brief episode of pain that comes on suddenly. Most acute back pain is due to mechanical causes, such as a strain or sprain, in which pain radiates from the spine and its supporting structures. The pain may spread to the buttocks, thighs or knees, and many sufferers also experience spasms. Mechanical back pain is generally more noticeable when flexing the back or lifting heavy objects.

**Chronic, persistent back pain** – When back pain persists beyond four to six weeks, further medical evaluation is required. This pain is often related to the spinal joints, discs or supporting muscles of the back. In rare cases, cancer or an infection is found.

What are the causes of low back pain?

The back is a complex structure of bone and muscle, supported by cartilage, tendons and ligaments and fed by a network of blood vessels and nerves. The back — especially the lower back — bears much of the body's weight during walking, running, lifting and other activities. It makes sense, then, that injuries to the lower back — such as strains and sprains — are common.

A common cause of low back pain is overstretched or injured muscles that support the lower back. Muscles and connective tissues can be injured from incorrectly lifting or carrying heavy objects. Muscles in the back or abdominal also can become weak from lack of exercise. Engaging in activity that involves pushing and pulling — such as weightlifting and football — may increase the risk of a low-back injury. Other causes of low back pain include:

- Poor posture
- Standing or sitting in the same place for a long time
- Being significantly overweight
- Smoking
- “Slipped” disc, caused when a disc between vertebrae bulges past the bones and presses against a nerve
- Osteoporosis (thinning of bone)
- Osteoarthritis, a breakdown of the tissues or bones of the joint
- Fibromyalgia, an illness that causes achy, tender muscles
- Trauma from injury due to an accident or fall that causes a fracture or muscle strain
- Serious illnesses such as cancer or infection (this is rare)

Prevention is the most important management technique. Controlling the factors you can control may help you avoid or recover quickly from back problems.
Diagnosing back pain

A careful evaluation of your medical history and a physical examination will help your healthcare provider determine the cause of your back pain. He or she will then work with you to create an appropriate treatment plan.

Your doctor may ask a series of questions to help identify possible causes of the pain. These questions may focus on lifestyle factors, when your pain began, where your pain is located, what effect it has had on your daily activities, and whether your pain has responded to any treatment. The doctor also will ask about your medical, surgical, family and social history.

Mild strains and sprains can usually be diagnosed based on a medical history — including a review of the method of injury and the symptoms — and a physical exam. In cases of more severe back pain, an imaging study may be ordered. If your symptoms or the examination suggest the possibility of infection, malignancy or a pinched nerve, additional tests may be needed. However, X-rays, MRI/CT scans, EMGs and lab tests are necessary in only a small number of cases.

THE MIND-BODY ISSUE

The mind and body often work together in shaping our experiences. Spine pain can carry a heavy psychological burden when patients are unable to participate in their daily activities. Depression or frustration may make the pain worse; on the other hand, a positive attitude and a sense of independence may lessen the pain.

Treating back pain

CONSERVATIVE CARE

Many people diagnose their own back pain based on experience, and treat the pain with over-the-counter medications and rest. Fortunately, most back injuries will heal with this conservative approach.

For patients who do not improve quickly, Cleveland Clinic physicians will first explore nonsurgical treatment options for back pain. For moderate-to-severe strains and sprains, the treatment often occurs in two phases. The first phase, to reduce pain and spasm, may involve rest and the use of ice packs and compression (pressure), especially for the first 24 to 48 hours following an injury. An over-the-counter nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug such as ibuprofen (Motrin®) may be recommended to help reduce pain and swelling.

For the second phase, patients are encouraged to return to a near-normal schedule to promote rapid recovery from back pain. Bed rest is rarely recommended for the majority of spine pain conditions. Most people experience a full recovery within two weeks. If symptoms continue for more than two weeks, additional treatments may be required.

Back pain and sciatica

Pain that affects primarily the back should be distinguished from a spinal condition that results mostly in leg pain, a disorder commonly called sciatica. Typically, sciatica is the result of a “pinched nerve” in the spinal column. In most cases, the cause of sciatica is clearly defined; for example, a disc problem or arthritis. The cause of an episode of back pain, on the other hand, often is more difficult to pinpoint.
INTERVENTIONAL TREATMENTS

For some patients, a prescription pain medication and physical therapy are enough to control the pain. Rapid healing can be significantly enhanced through physical therapy, which focuses on the structures that support the spine. It is important to work with a spine-oriented physical therapist trained in an exercise approach. Most exercise programs can be performed at home without special equipment. The therapy will shorten recovery time and return you to work and leisure activities as quickly as possible.

For a small percentage of patients, back pain remains chronic, persistent and disabling. For these people, more intensive treatment may be needed. Cleveland Clinic specialists offer the latest treatments and technologies for back pain, including:

- Nerve blocks and injections
- Radiofrequency ablation
- Intradiscal ablation
- Continuous infusions of pain medications
- Spinal cord stimulators
- Intraspinal drug pumps
- Osteopathic manipulation
- Acupuncture
- Kyphoplasty
- SOUND Prescription Advice

Families, friends and neighbors are often a source of advice on treating back pain. However, it is important to realize that everyone is different and it is never safe to take someone else’s medication. Always contact your healthcare provider before taking any medication that is not prescribed specifically for you.
Surgical Treatment

For some patients, surgery may be the only possible solution to alleviate back pain. Although spinal surgery is often delicate and complex, our surgeons have one of the highest success rates in the country for even the most complicated procedures. They also can offer the latest minimally invasive techniques, when indicated, which result in less postoperative pain and faster recovery.

In the hands of a skilled, experienced surgeon, the benefits of surgical treatment usually far outweigh the risks. The most common surgical procedures are for degenerative spine conditions such as disc herniation and spinal stenosis, followed by spinal deformity such as scoliosis and kyphosis, fracture/trauma and spine tumor. Whatever your diagnosis, our specialists apply their knowledge and skill, combined with the latest techniques and advanced technologies, to relieve your pain and restore your function to the highest degree possible.

SPINE CONDITIONS TREATED AT CLEVELAND CLINIC

Cleveland Clinic has experts to treat these and other back and neck conditions:

- Degenerative back and neck disorders
- Disc herniation
- Spinal deformities, including scoliosis and kyphosis
- Spinal fracture
- Spinal stenosis
- Spinal tumor
- Spondylosis/spondylolisthesis
- Chiari malformation

Keeping your back health

It is not possible to prevent all back injuries, but you can take some simple steps to help lower the risk of a sprain or strain. Here are some “back-saving” tips:

- Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet to keep your bones and muscles strong.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Excess weight puts added stress on the structures of the lower back.
- Exercise regularly, including stretching, to keep your joints flexible and your back and abdominal muscles strong.
- Choose activities and sports, such as swimming and biking, that do not place your lower back at risk of injury.
- Use good body mechanics when sitting, standing and lifting. Try to keep your back straight and your shoulders back. When sitting, keep your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Don’t over-reach, and avoid twisting movements. When lifting, bend your knees and use your strong leg muscles to help balance the load.
• Maintain good posture. If you start to feel sore or stiff, change your posture and modify your body mechanics. Your body will warn you, using pain as a signal, when your mechanics are improperly aligned.

• Practice safety measures to help prevent falls, such as wearing shoes that fit properly and keeping stairs and walkways free of clutter.

• Don’t smoke. Nicotine interferes with blood flow to the muscles.

Cleveland Clinic Department of Pain Management

When chronic back pain disrupts your quality of life and does not improve with standard treatments such as aspirin and ibuprofen, Cleveland Clinic’s Department of Pain Management is here to help. There are many safe, proven, effective treatments available, that can help reduce your chronic back pain. The sooner you seek treatment, the sooner you can start enjoying life again.

Our board-certified physicians are dedicated to the goal of helping people with chronic pain return to a normal, productive lifestyle. Using diagnostic technology, paired with medical and interventional therapeutics, they will work with you to identify the source of your back pain, reduce the pain, and teach you to manage it.

Among the conditions our specialists treat are:

• Back and neck pain, including herniated discs, spinal stenosis, tumors and arthritis

• Chronic abdominal pain and pelvic pain

• Complex regional pain syndrome

• Muscle and joint pain and arthritis

• Headache

• Sports injuries

• Disorders of the nervous system, including shingles and occipital and trigeminal neuralgia (facial pain)

• Peripheral neuropathy, including diabetic neuropathy and chemotherapy-induced neuropathy

• Pain associated with HIV

• Cancer pain

• Pain associated with osteoporosis and vertebral compression fractures

• Post-surgical pain syndromes

Our staff is acclaimed for its research and education in pain management. Patients who qualify have the opportunity to participate in clinical trials seeking better, more effective treatments for managing pain. Our physicians regularly publish in leading medical journals and are invited lecturers at medical education seminars across the country and around the world.

To make an appointment with a Cleveland Clinic Pain Management specialist, call 216.444.PAIN (7246) or toll-free 800.392.3353, or visit clevelandclinic.org/painmanagement for further information.
Cleveland Clinic Center for Spine Health

The Center for Spine Health’s multidisciplinary team brings together the expertise of nationally recognized Cleveland Clinic specialists in orthopaedic surgery, neurosurgery and medical spine, offering patients with back and neck pain the latest, most innovative and effective medical and surgical treatments.

The Center for Spine Health integrates research, clinical practice and education, with the goals of improving patient care, developing unique technologies and subspecializations, and promoting cross-fertilization of ideas among staff.

From periodic monitoring to intensive surgical correction, we provide state-of-the-art management for back and spine problems. Among the many therapeutic options we offer are:

- Spine surgery
- Mature spine care
- Spine wellness
- Spine injury prevention
- Intervventional spine therapies
- Rehabilitation and physical therapy

The Center for Spine Health is located at several areas within Cleveland Clinic’s health system.

You may be able to schedule your pre- and postoperative appointments at one of our convenient community locations.

To make an appointment with a Cleveland Clinic Center for Spine Health specialist, call 216.636.5860 or toll-free 866.588.2264, or visit clevelandclinic.org/spine for further information.
Living with back pain

In some circumstances, back pain will persist despite maximal medical treatments. The Chronic Pain Rehabilitation Program is an intensive, three- to four-week treatment and education program that targets patients who are devastated by such pain. The program’s services include physical and occupational therapy, coping skills training, medication management and psychotherapy to reduce negative emotions that result from and worsen pain.

Patients may be referred to the program by a physician, though a referral is not necessary. For same day appointments or more information call 216.636.5860 or toll free, 866.588.2264.

Here are some tips for living with persistent, chronic back pain that you can start today:

- **Medical compliance** – It is important that to take your medication as prescribed. By relieving pain symptoms, medications can facilitate an active, exercise-oriented rehabilitation program.

- **Physical conditioning** – This is particularly important for chronic pain patients. Carrying excess weight, smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol will exacerbate chronic pain. Active, exercise-oriented physical therapy is the cornerstone of treatment.

- **Stress reduction** – Stress makes pain worse. Not all stress is avoidable, but reducing or eliminating sources of persistent stress, where possible, will help in reducing your overall experience of pain.

- **Interpersonal support** – It is natural for others to become frustrated with a person’s chronic pain and complaints. You need to make a special effort to foster and maintain social support.

- **Activities** – One of the best strategies for living with chronic pain is distraction. It is important for self-esteem to maintain some work role if possible, establish a clear role in the family, take on regular interpersonal duties, and maintain hobbies or personal interests.

- **Pain reduction techniques** – Psychological approaches such as yoga, biofeedback and self-hypnosis are helpful in reducing chronic pain.

Need a second opinion but cannot travel to Cleveland?

Our MyConsult service offers secure online second opinions for patients who cannot travel to Cleveland. Through this service, patients enter detailed health information and mail pertinent test results to us. Then, Cleveland Clinic experts render an opinion that includes treatment options or alternative recommendations regarding future therapeutic considerations. To learn more about MyConsult, please visit clevelandclinic.org/myconsult.

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