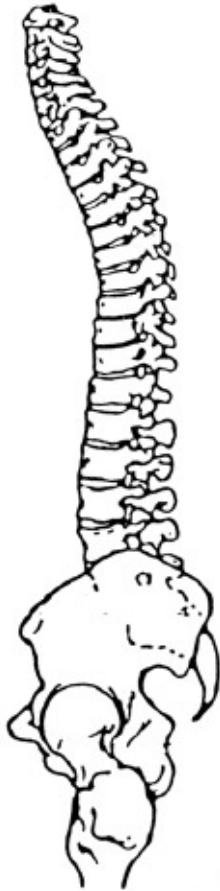


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# Managing Low Back Pain



*The key to managing low back pain is to understand it and know when to ask for help from a doctor. This brochure provides a brief overview of how to recognize, understand, and safely treat your low back pain.*

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## Rules To Live By

- ◆ Lose weight. Extra pounds, especially around the middle, increase stress on the lower back.
- ◆ Don't smoke. Smoking can interfere with blood circulation to the lower back, while a constant cough can bring on a back spasm.
- ◆ Reduce stress. Economic worries, family pressures, and fatigue can cause back spasms or tense muscles. Daily exercise is an excellent way to relieve stress.
- ◆ Walk short distances instead of driving.
- ◆ Climb a few flights of stairs instead of taking the elevator.
- ◆ Choose a sport that is easy on your back such as walking, swimming, or bicycling in an upright position.
- ◆ Be aware there are times when immediate medical attention is required (see What Are My Options?).
- ◆ Remember, most back pain from minor strains can be resolved with over-the-counter medicines and simple home treatment.

This patient education brochure, prepared by the U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine, is a product of the partnership initiative between DoD agencies and the Veterans Administration.

The recommendations that the guidelines present were derived from a consensus of expert opinion after an extensive review of the medical literature. The guidelines were also reviewed by orthopedic surgeons, physicians, nurses, physical therapists, orthopedic physician assistants, and ergonomists from the Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force.



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## What Are My Options?

### Actions you can take:

- ◆ Most back pain resulting from minor strains can be resolved with over-the-counter medicines and simple home treatment.
- ◆ If the pain gets better as time passes, or the pain is not the result of a serious injury, then successful low back treatment by yourself is possible.

### See your doctor if any of the following problems occur within a few days of your back injury:

- ◆ Pain that keeps you from moving.
- ◆ Pain that runs down a leg or goes into an arm.
- ◆ Night pain that keeps you from sleeping.
- ◆ Pain that increases after a few days rest.
- ◆ Pain that does not lessen after rest and basic home treatment.

### Seek immediate attention from your doctor if you have any of the following:

- ◆ Difficulty controlling your bladder or bowel movement.
- ◆ Loss of sensation in the rectal area.
- ◆ Pain following a fall or impact to the back.
- ◆ Severe leg pain down both legs, weakness, tingling, numbness, or inability to move.
- ◆ Pain that is steadily increasing over several hours.
- ◆ Chills, fever, or night sweats.
- ◆ Difficulty with balance or coordination.

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## Self-Care Guidelines

### Over-the-Counter Medicines

- ◆ Over-the-counter (OTC) medicines are available without a prescription. They are very effective for reducing inflammation, swelling, and pain. OTC pain relievers include acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol®) and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as aspirin, ibuprofen (e.g., Advil® or Motrin® IB), and naproxen sodium (e.g., Aleve®). **Caution: Do not take aspirin with ibuprofen or naproxen sodium.**
- ◆ OTCs are medicines and you should take them with caution. If you are taking other medicines, talk with your doctor or pharmacist to be sure an OTC medicine will not negatively interact with any of the prescription drugs you are taking.

### Treatment Without Medication

There are many safe and effective ways to relieve your low back pain without using medication. Sometimes these techniques are used in combination with drug treatments. Many of these pain relief methods can be used at home; others require the help of a doctor. Remember to talk with your doctor about any pain relief techniques you are planning to use.

### Ice

- ◆ For a day or two, apply ice or a cold pack for about 20 minutes at a time, three or four times a day.
- ◆ Always wrap ice or cold pack in a thin protective layer—such as a towel or face cloth. This will protect your skin.

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## Heat

- ◆ If ice has not relieved the pain after 2 or 3 days, apply moist heat.
  - \* Wrap a hot water bottle in a towel or take a warm shower.
  - \* Apply moist heat about 15 to 20 minutes, two or three times a day.
- ◆ Do not use heat if you injured your back in a fall, or if the heat increases your symptoms.

## Bed Rest

- ◆ Staying in bed more than a few days can cause supporting back muscles to become weaker; some movement is necessary to heal properly.

## Chronic Low Back Pain

### X-rays

- ◆ Your doctor may order x-rays if you have persistent or recurrent low back pain.
- ◆ X-rays are usually not necessary in the beginning of low back pain treatment. This is because back muscles, ligaments, and discs do not show up on x-rays.
- ◆ X-rays are necessary for significant trauma (a fall or blow to the back), or for older patients with severe degenerative conditions (brittle bones).

### Surgery

- ◆ Surgery is most often not needed. Nonsurgical treatments, exercise, and good body mechanics are usually effective at relieving low back pain.
- ◆ For complicated disc injury, surgical treatment may be necessary depending on the type of back injury. Consult your doctor about surgical options.

## Treating Your Own Back

Recovery from an acute injury takes some time. It is important to increase your activity gradually so you do not increase your discomfort.

If you suffer from an acute back injury-

- ◆ Perform stretches in a smooth motion and hold the position for a few seconds; do not bounce or jerk while stretching.
- ◆ Do these stretches and exercises after a day or two of rest, if rest is necessary.
- ◆ Get your muscles ready for activity by stretching. This reduces the tightness in muscles and provides them with more blood flow.
- ◆ You may experience some discomfort when doing these exercises. If the discomfort increases and remains the following day, consult your doctor.
- ◆ Devote just 10 to 20 minutes a day to the health of your back. It will aid your recovery and help prevent further injury.

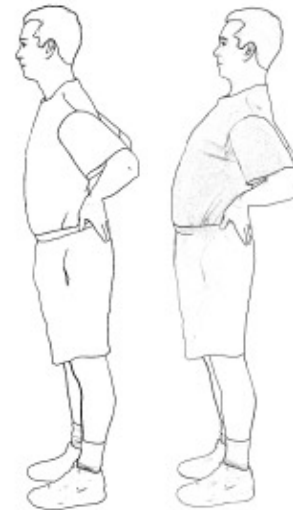
## Press-Ups

1. Lie on your stomach with your legs straight and feet together.
  2. Prop up your upper body with your forearms.
  3. Push upward while keeping your pelvis on the floor.
  4. Hold for five seconds.
  5. Gently lower yourself to the floor.
  6. Repeat five times.
- Remember to keep your forearms in contact with the floor at all times.



## Backward Stretch

1. Stand upright.
2. Place your feet a shoulder width apart.
3. Place your hands on your lower back.
4. Lean backward while keeping your neck straight.
5. Lean further back until you feel a slight stretch in your back.
6. Hold for a count of five.
7. Return to the upright position.
8. Repeat three or four times.



## Lower Back and Hip Stretch

1. Lie on your back with knees bent and feet flat on the floor.
2. Press your lower back onto the floor.
3. Grasp one knee with both hands and pull toward your chest keeping your head on the floor.
4. Keep the other knee bent and foot on the floor.
5. Hold for a count of ten.
6. Return to starting position.
7. Repeat with the other leg.
8. Repeat ten times on each leg for three sets.



## Pelvic Tilt

1. Lie on your back.
2. Bend your knees at a 90-degree angle.
3. Tighten stomach muscles and buttocks. See Figure A.
4. Slowly push your lower back downward. See Figure B.
5. Hold your back in this position for five seconds.
6. Slowly return to normal and relax. See Figure A.
7. Repeat five times.



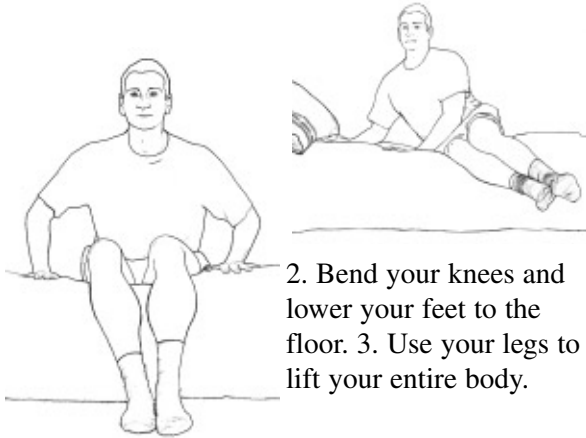
Figure A



Figure B

## Good Body Mechanics Can Protect Your Back

**Getting out of bed.** 1. Roll on your side and push your body up with your arms.



2. Bend your knees and lower your feet to the floor. 3. Use your legs to lift your entire body.

**Sleeping.** 1. Sleep on a firm, comfortable mattress. 2. If the mattress is too soft, insert a board under the mattress for firmness. 3. Sleep on your back with a pillow under your knees or on your side with a pillow between your bent knees. 4. Sleep on a contoured pillow (with a shallow curve for the head) to help keep your neck and spine aligned during sleep.



### Getting into a vehicle.

1. Use the door to help you sit. 2. Grasp the steering wheel for support when seated, and slowly swing both legs into the car. 3. If you use a seat pad or back support, secure it to the seat to prevent slippage.



### Getting out of a vehicle.

1. Use the steering wheel as leverage to help pivot your lower body out of the car. 2. If possible, slowly swing legs out of the car at the same time to prevent twisting your back. 3. Use

the door for support as you raise your body with your legs.

**Sitting.** While sitting at work or at home, try to maintain good posture. 1. Keep your knees at a 90-degree angle. 2. Keep your feet flat on the floor or on a footrest. 3. Use a back support or a rolled up towel to support the normal curvature of your lower back. 4. Keep your ears, shoulders, and hips in a straight line perpendicular to the floor. 5. Bend your elbows at about 90 degrees, with your wrists parallel to the floor. 6. Allow your arms to rest on the soft armrests of a chair. This will also relieve some compression on your lower back.



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**Lifting.** 1. When lifting, keep the object close to your body. 2. If the object is on the floor, widen your stance (slightly outside of shoulder width) and bend only at the hips and the knees. 3. Keep your back in its normal arched position while lifting. 4. Do not lift by bending forward and using your lower back. 5. Do not twist while you are lifting. 6. Take a breath and breathe out as you exert yourself during the lift. 7. Tighten your stomach muscles and begin the upward lift by using your legs. 8. If you are carrying the object, be sure to keep it close to your body and maintain a straight spine.



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