

BACK BASICS



Self-Care for
Spine and Disk Problems

Movement Keeps Your Back Alive

Your back is made to move. The right movement helps keep your back healthy and pain free. The wrong movement can lead to back problems. This booklet can help you learn the basics on keeping your back healthy and moving right.

When Back Pain Strikes

It may come as the sharp pain of a sudden injury. It may be a passing twinge that keeps coming back. Or it may be a constant ache. In any case, back pain can limit your life. Using self-care, you can help reduce back pain. Self-care can also help prevent pain from flaring up in the future.



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A Team Approach to Treatment

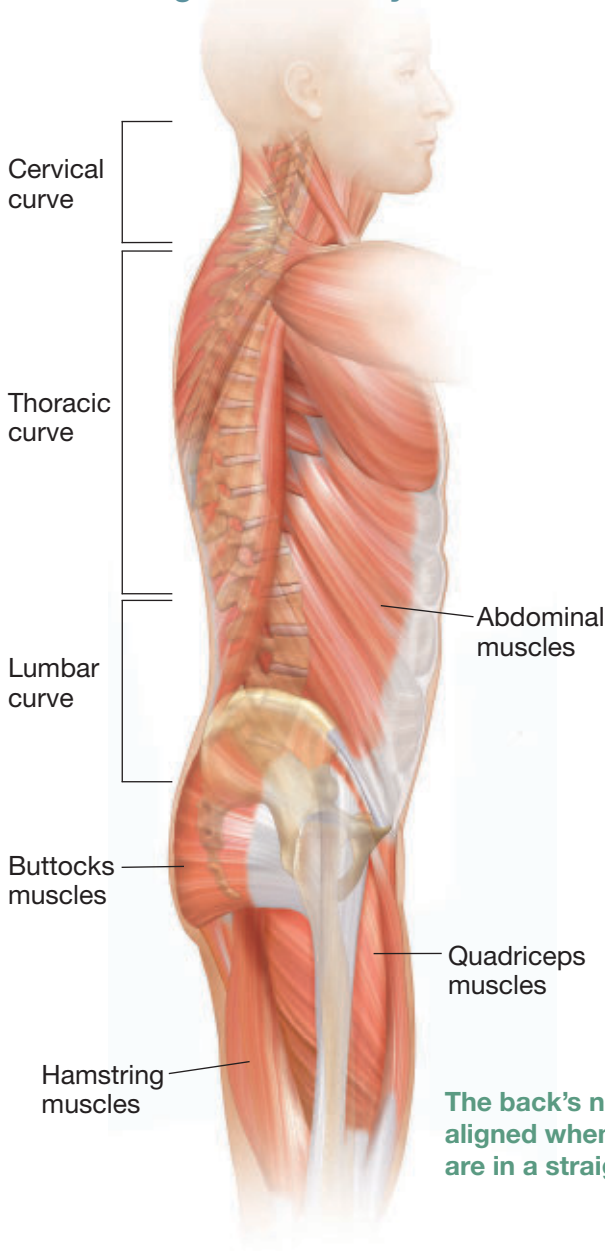
After diagnosing your back problem, your provider will prescribe a treatment plan that's right for you. Depending on your problem, your provider may want you to work with a **physical therapist (PT)**. A PT is an expert in safe movement and exercise who can teach you techniques for self-care. By using these techniques as directed, you can improve your symptoms. Even in cases when surgery is needed, self-care is crucial to recovery.

Self-Care Can Help

In many cases, self-care is all that's needed to treat your back problem. Start by learning about the spine. Then, use good body mechanics and do regular back exercises. These can protect your back and help long-term problems heal.

Understanding a Healthy Spine

Muscles help keep the spine's natural curves properly aligned. Disks cushion the bones of your spine and play a role in back health. When all of these parts of a spine are healthy, the spine can support the body while letting it move freely.



Three Natural Curves

The spine is made of bones (**vertebrae**) and pads of soft tissue (**disks**). These parts are arranged in three curves: the cervical curve, thoracic curve, and lumbar curve. When properly aligned, these curves keep your body balanced. They also support your body when you move. By distributing your weight throughout your spine, the curves help protect your back.

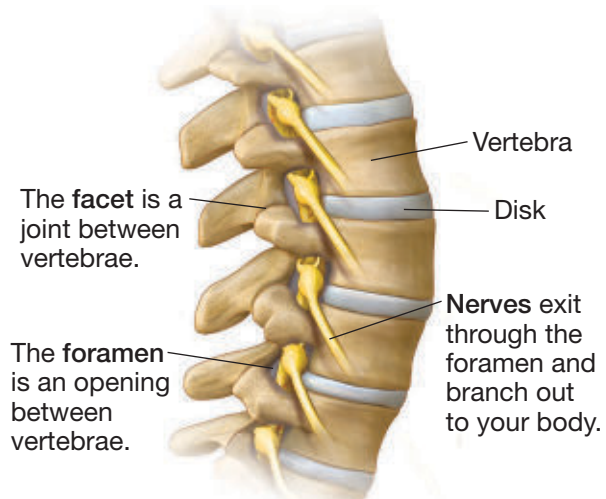
Strong, Flexible Muscles

Strong, flexible back and abdominal muscles help support the three curves of the spine. They do so by holding the vertebrae and disks in proper alignment. If the hip and leg muscles are also strong and flexible, they can reduce strain on the back.

The back's natural curves are correctly aligned when the ears, shoulders, and hips are in a straight line.

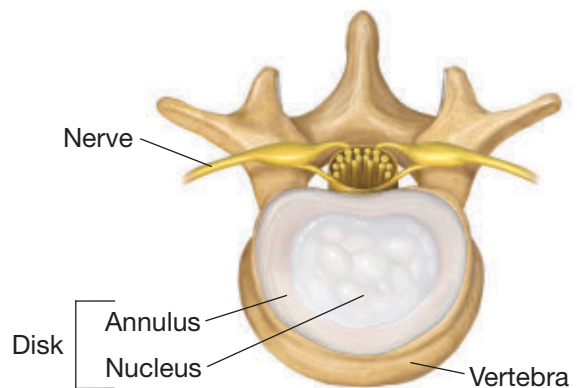
The Lumbar Curve

The lumbar curve is the hardest-working part of the spine. Aligning this curve helps prevent damage to vertebrae, disks, and other parts of the spine.



Cushioning Disks

Disks are the soft pads of tissue between the vertebrae. They absorb shock caused by movement. Each disk has a spongy center (**nucleus**) and a tougher outer ring (**annulus**). Movement within the nucleus allows the vertebrae to rock back and forth on the disks. Disk size, shape, and flexibility change throughout the day.



Top view of vertebra and disk

Your Disks Change

While you sleep, the nucleus fills with fluid. This increases pressure in the disk.



During the day, movement pushes fluid in and out of the nucleus. This keeps the disk healthy.



How the Spine Becomes Unhealthy

Poor movement patterns and posture problems throw the back out of alignment. Over time, they can damage disks, strain ligaments, and lead to back pain.

Poor Posture Backfires

Poor posture can lead to back pain.

- Slouching causes too much **flexion** in the spine. This puts pressure on the annulus.
- Too much arch in the low back (too much **extension**) can overload and inflame the facets.

The back muscles may tighten or spasm to “splint” and protect the spine. This adds to the pain you feel.



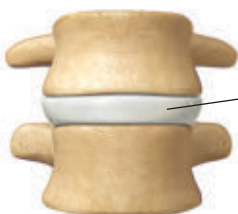
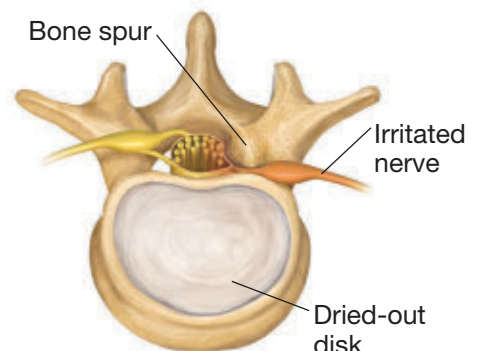
Too much flexion (slouching) puts pressure on the disk.



Too much extension (excessive lumbar curve) harms the facets.

How Disks Wear Out

Normal aging may cause disks to wear out (**degenerate**). As disks degenerate and dry out, the vertebrae get closer together and become irritated. Bony outgrowths (**spurs**) may form. This can cause the foramen to narrow (called **stenosis**) and irritate nearby nerves. Poor movement and posture can speed up the process.



Normal disk



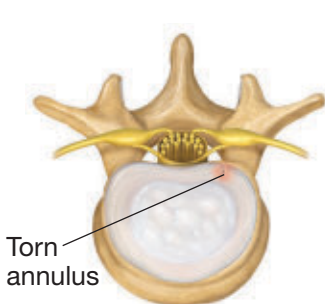
Narrowed disk



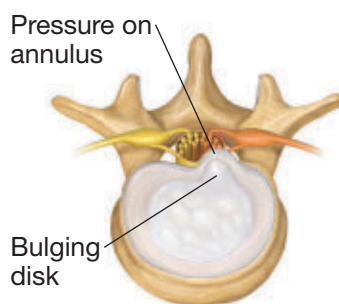
Bone spurs

Common Spine and Disk Problems

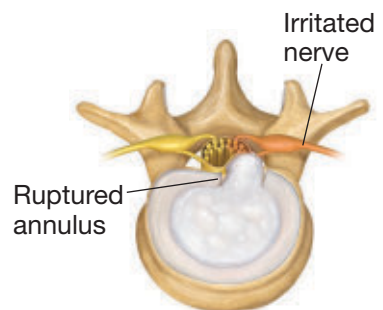
Back problems can occur when disks tear, bulge, or rupture. In such cases, an injured disk may no longer cushion the vertebrae and absorb shock. As a result, the rest of your spine may compensate. This can lead to pain, stiffness, weakness, and numbness.



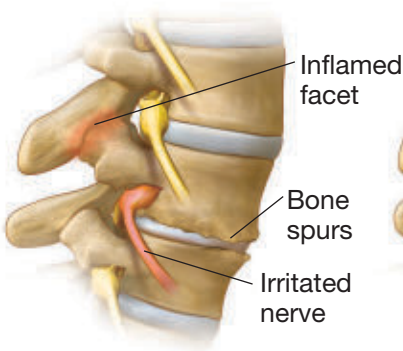
Torn annulus. A sudden movement may cause a tiny tear in an annulus.



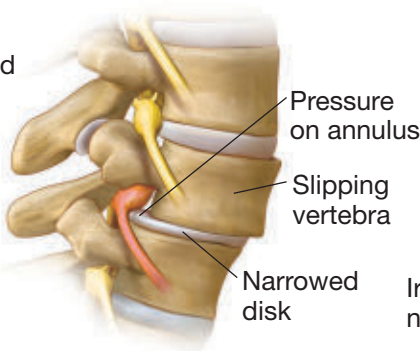
Bulging disk. As a disk wears out, the nucleus begins to bulge into the annulus.



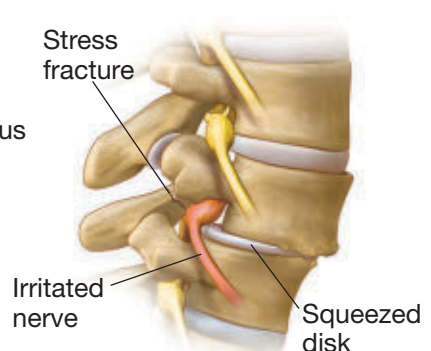
Ruptured disk. As a disk ruptures, its nucleus can squeeze out and irritate a nerve.



Arthritis. As disks wear out over time, bone spurs form. These growths can irritate nerves and inflame facets and soft tissues.



Too much movement. As a disk wears out, vertebrae may move more than they should. Rubbing can then damage the disk and nearby bone.



Spondylolisthesis. Joint degeneration or a fracture may allow vertebrae to slip forward. This can irritate nerves and squeeze disks. It can also worsen stenosis.

Diagnosing Your Back Problem

A medical evaluation is needed to find the cause of your back problem. This can include a health history, an exam, and diagnostic tests. After diagnosis, a team approach to treatment often works best. You will work with your provider and PT to improve the health of your back.

Your Health History

Your health history helps the provider evaluate your back pain and other medical problems. Your provider is likely to ask about what symptoms you feel and when you notice them.

An Exam

Your provider may check your spine and assess your posture. The flexibility and strength of your muscles may be checked. The reflexes and sensation in your legs may also be tested.

Diagnostic Tests

You may have one or more tests. Imaging tests such as X-rays, CT scans, and MRIs help show problems that may lead to pain. They also help plan your treatment.



When to Call Your Provider

Call the provider right away if you have back, hip, or leg pain and any of the following:

- Problems controlling your bladder or bowels
- Numbness near the genital or rectal area
- Extreme leg weakness, numbness, or constant leg pain
- Fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher, or as directed by your provider
- Excruciating pain that will not subside



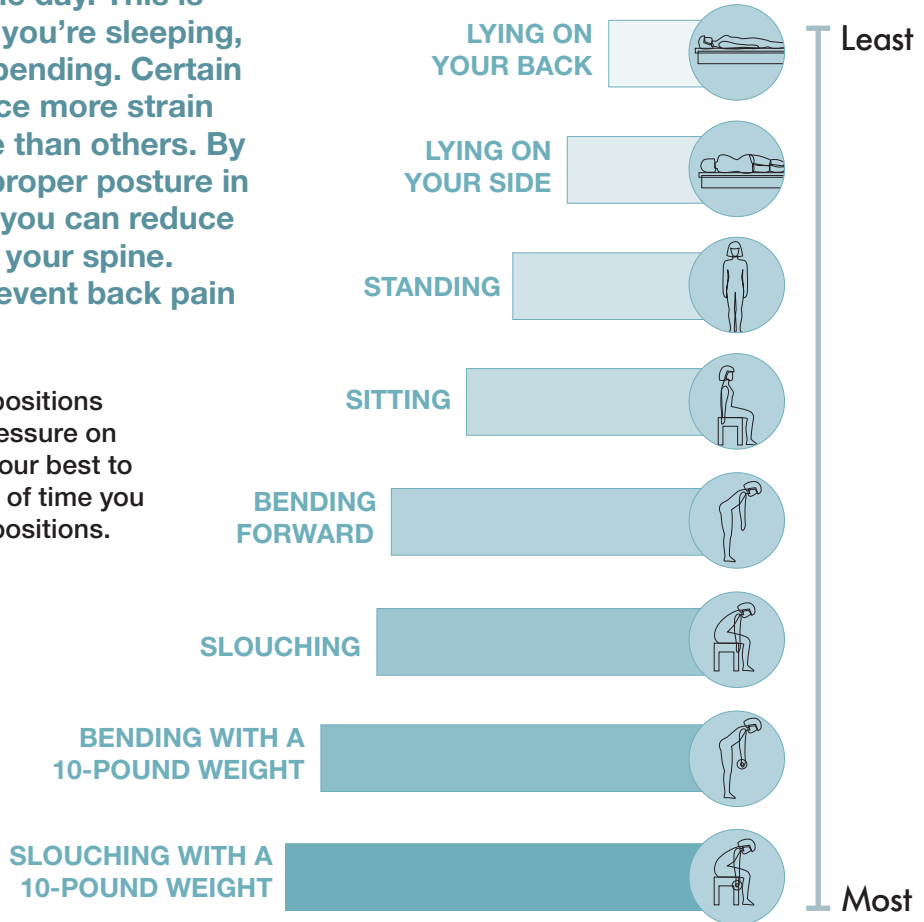
The Key to Safe Movement

Your spine bears your weight throughout the day. This is true whether you're sleeping, standing, or bending. Certain positions place more strain on your spine than others. By maintaining proper posture in all positions, you can reduce the stress on your spine. This helps prevent back pain and injury.

►► Learn which positions place excess pressure on your disks. Do your best to limit the amount of time you spend in these positions.



Pressure on the Spine



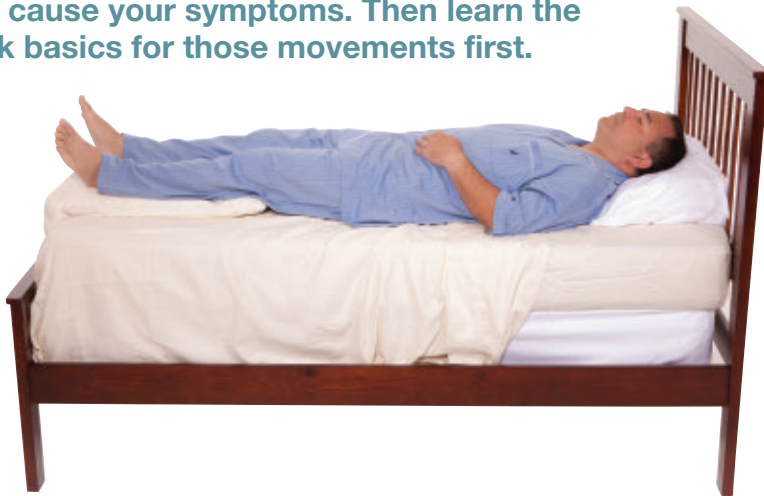
Check Your Standing Posture

To improve your standing posture, follow these steps:

- Breathe deeply.
- Relax your shoulders, hips, and knees.
- Think of the ears, shoulders, hips, and ankles as a series of dots. Adjust your body to connect the dots in a straight line.
- Tuck your buttocks in just a bit and tighten your stomach muscles if you need to.

Learning Safe Body Mechanics

If you sleep, sit, and move the right way, your weight is balanced throughout your spine. As a result, the risk for back injury is reduced. Learn safe body mechanics a step at a time. Think about which movements cause your symptoms. Then learn the correct back basics for those movements first.



Lying Down

- If you lie on your back, putting a pillow under your knees may make you more comfortable.
- When lying on your side, bend your knees and place a pillow between them.
- If you lie on your stomach, place a pillow under your abdomen.

Standing

- Bend your knees slightly to take stress off your lower back.
- Wear shoes that support your feet. This helps keep your spine aligned.
- If you must stand for long periods, rest one foot on a low shelf or stool. Switch feet often.

Sitting

- Sit in chairs that support your back. Keep your ears in line with your hips. If needed, support your lumbar curve with a rolled-up towel or lumbar roll.
- Your knees should be level with your hips. Your feet should be flat on the floor or on a footrest.

Lifting Below the Waist

- Bend at your knees and hips instead of your waist. Do your best to keep your hips in line with your shoulders. Tighten abdominal muscles.
- Hold objects close to your body to limit strain on your back.
- Raise your body and the load at the same time. Let your leg muscles do most of the lifting.

Reaching and Lifting

- Store common items between shoulder and hip level.
- Get close to the item. Use a stool or special reaching tool, if you need to.
- Tighten your abdominal muscles to support your back. Use the muscles in your arms and legs (not your back) to lift the item.



Turning

- Think of your upper body as one straight unit from your shoulders to your buttocks.
- Turn with your feet, not your back or knees. Point your feet in the direction you want to go. Then step around and turn. Maintain your spine's 3 curves.

Exercising for a Healthier Back

Your provider or PT will tailor an exercise program for you. Exercise at least once a day, as instructed. During each session, repeat each exercise as often as directed. Tell your provider or PT if you have new or ongoing pain.

□ Neck Glide

- Sit or stand up straight. Keep your chin level.
- Glide your head straight back. (You should feel as if you have a double chin.) Try to align your ear with your shoulder.
- Repeat ____ times.



□ Pelvic Tilt

- Lie down and bend both knees.
- Tighten your abdominal and buttock muscles. Tilt your hips slightly toward your nose until your lumbar curve flattens against the floor.
- Relax. Repeat ____ times.



□ Hamstring Stretch

- Lie on your back. Place a towel or your hands around your thigh, just above the knee. Tighten your abdominal muscles.
- Pull your leg toward your chest. Gently straighten your leg as much as you can until you feel a stretch.
- Relax. Repeat ____ times.



□ Partial Sit-Up

- Lie on your back with both knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Fold your arms across your chest.
- Tighten your stomach muscles. Slowly raise your head and shoulders off the floor. Keep your ears and shoulders aligned.
- Pause when your shoulder blades come off the floor. Relax back down. Repeat ____ times.



□ Hip Stretch

- Kneel with one foot in front of you. Tighten your abdominal muscles.
- Slowly shift your weight forward onto your front foot. You should feel a gentle stretch on the front of the hip and groin.
- Relax. Repeat ____ times.



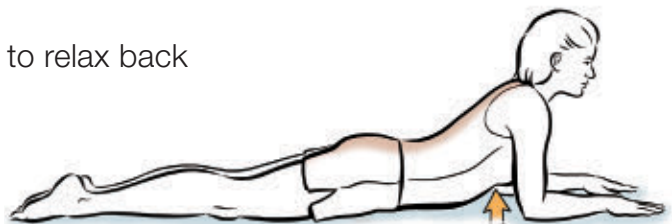
□ Wall Slide

- Start with your back against a wall. Place your feet about 18 inches from the wall and hip-width apart.
- Slowly slide down about halfway to a sitting position. Don't let your hips go lower than your knees. Hold for ____ seconds. Slide back up.
- Repeat ____ times.



□ Press-Up

- Lie on your stomach. Place your forearms on the floor, about shoulder-width apart.
- Push your upper body off the floor. Be sure to keep your hips in contact with the floor.
- Slowly allow your upper body to relax back down to the floor.
- Repeat ____ times.



Note: Do press-ups only if your provider or PT says that you should.

Thinking Back Throughout the Day

Take care of your back throughout the day. You will have fewer back problems if you do. Try to warm up before you move. Shift positions often. Also do your best to form healthy habits.

Warm Up for the Day

Do a few slow, catlike stretches before starting your day. This simple warm-up can decrease pressure in your disks, stretch your back muscles, and help prevent injuries.

Shift Positions Often

At work and at home, change positions often. This helps keep your body from getting stiff. Stand up frequently or lean back in your chair while sitting. Set an alarm to get up and move for a few minutes every half-hour.

Form Healthy Habits

- Keep a healthy weight. Carrying excess weight strains your back. Losing just a few extra pounds can help a lot. Talk with your provider about a healthy weight for you.
- Handle minor aches with cold and heat. Apply cold the first 24 to 48 hours or until the severe pain subsides. After that, you may use heat if it helps you feel better. Always place a cloth between your skin and the cold or heat source.
- Topical analgesic creams may provide some pain relief. Use them as directed.
- Take medications as directed. This helps keep pain under control. Follow instructions on the label. If you have any questions, be sure to ask your provider or pharmacist.



Walking to Better Back Fitness

Walking is great for your back. It's as simple as taking a step out the door. Always wear comfortable, supportive shoes when you walk.

Walk Each Day

A daily walk keeps your back and leg muscles stretched and strong. This gives your back better support. Make it a goal to walk 20 to 30 minutes each day. If that seems like too much, work up to it. Start with a 5-minute walk. When you're ready, add a few minutes more.

Make a Point to Move

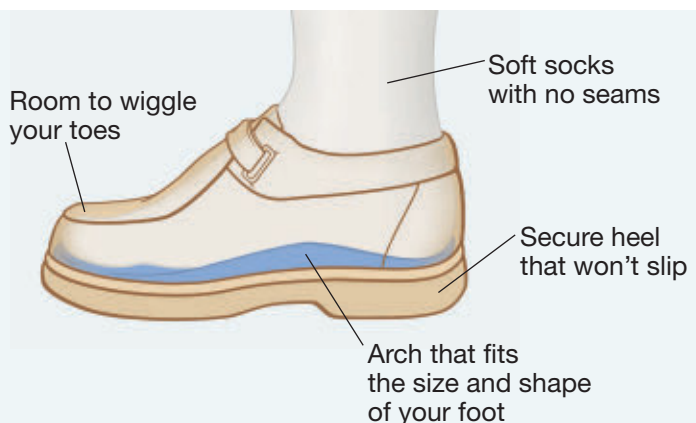
Regular movement is good for your back. To move more throughout the day:

- Take the stairs instead of the elevator or escalator for at least 1 floor.
- Walk to talk with a coworker instead of calling or emailing.
- Park farther away from the store or mall entrance.
- Walk 1 or 2 stops farther before getting on the bus.



Wear the Right Shoes

When you walk, wear a good pair of walking or jogging shoes. These shoes absorb shock when your foot hits the ground. This helps the disks cushion your spine.





Moving Wisely, Moving Well

Your healthcare team can teach you the basics of back care and good movement. But from there, back fitness may be up to you. Learn to move wisely. Then stay on the move. Whether you're walking home from the store, lifting, or running around the block, the basics of safe movement can help keep you on the go.

Also available in Spanish

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