

Being Active when You Have Low Back Pain



Being active will help you feel better, move better and sleep better. Experts now say that any physical activity counts toward better health – even just a few minutes!

Most adults will experience low back pain (LBP) sometime in their lifetime. There are many causes of low back pain but, in most cases, the cause of pain isn't clear – and is not dangerous. People who are more active have less back pain over time. Regardless of your pain level, being active boosts your mood and just makes life go better. Experts recommend that people with chronic LBP try to get the same amount of activity as the general public.



Getting Started

Keep it Simple

Sit less and move around more! Walk to the mailbox. Walk the dog. Dance in the kitchen. Take the stairs. Find opportunities to move throughout your day. It all adds up.

Talk with Your Provider

Check with your health care provider to make sure there aren't any specific tests, treatments or exercises you need before adopting these general activity guidelines.

Build a Plan

Start with low-impact activities you enjoy and will do regularly. Ask to meet with a physical therapist (PT), certified exercise professional or other member of the health care team who can customize a plan for you.

Motivation

What will help you stick with an activity plan? Would being active with a friend help? Would you do better in a supervised program or fitness center? Is there a better time of day?

To stay safe and injury free:

- Start with light to medium effort.
- Gradually increase your pace and time spent being active. Start low and go slow!
- Warm up and cool down at an easy pace before and after exercise.

Low back Pain Tips and Cautions

When you first have LBP your health care provider may suggest a few days of reduced activity, but typically NOT bed rest. It's important to keep moving – but without making your symptoms worse.

Other options to help with LBP include changing the way you do certain activities to reduce stress on your back, not staying in the same position for too long and early gentle exercise and movement.

Your provider will likely recommend different treatments for LBP depending on if it just started or has been going on for longer than 3 months. For both types, physical activity is important.

If you suffer from depression, anxiety, stress or insomnia, get help for those conditions; that can also improve your pain.

People with LBP do best with individually tailored programs that include aerobic activity, strength training and stretching. If activity causes pain that doesn't go away, or if being active doesn't help, check with your provider.

Aerobic Activity

Aerobic activity increases your heart rate and breathing. Build up to doing at least 150 minutes/week of moderate-intensity activity (like a brisk walk, light cycling or water exercise). Aerobic activity stretches and strengthens the back muscles while improving your stamina to promote healing and recovery.

What?

Any rhythmic, continuous activity

How often?

3-7 days/week

How hard?

Fairly light to somewhat hard

How much?

Start with a few minutes. Gradually build up to 30-60 minutes over the day.

Remember: Fit in 5 or 10 minutes here and there. Or go for 20-30 minutes. Be active however and wherever you can. To lose weight, do twice as much activity. Avoid high-impact activities especially if they worsen your pain.

Strength Training

Strength training helps you to function better and improves your overall health. Strength training can make daily activities like lifting laundry baskets or yardwork easier.

What?

Hand weights, resistance bands, weight machines or your own body (for example, kitchen counter push-ups or chair sit-to-stands)

How often?

2-3 days/week
*Rest day in between!

How hard?

Start with light effort. Build up to medium or hard effort if you can handle it.

How much?

10 -15 repetitions to start (for each major muscle group) Build up to 8-12 reps of challenging effort.

Remember: If you need it, get help from a physical therapist, athletic trainer or certified exercise professional. They can teach you the right way to do exercises, which exercises are best for you and how to breathe properly.

Strength Training Tips and Cautions:

- Strong trunk, abdominal, back (core muscles) and hip/leg muscles are key to maintaining better posture and movement patterns to help you be more active and reduce LBP.
- Slowly increase how much you lift and how often. Avoid straining or holding your breath when lifting.

Other Types of Physical Activity

Aerobic activity, strength training and stretching are at the heart of a program for those with low back pain. You may enjoy and benefit from the options below.

Flexibility

Stretching after you have warmed up is best. Stretch your muscles 2-7 days/week to the point of feeling tightness. Hold for 10-30 seconds (30-60 seconds for older adults). Areas to stretch include your back, hips, back of thighs and calves.

Posture Awareness

When sitting, standing or walking, keep a comfortable upright posture that isn't slumped or overly arched.

Yoga, Pilates and Tai Chi

All help with balance, strength and relaxation and can improve back pain. Make sure your instructor has expertise in adapting routines for those with back pain.

Simply take more steps!

Use a smart phone or activity tracker to measure your progress and stay motivated. Count your steps daily for the first week. Slowly build up to 7,000-9,000 steps/day.

More Help

To learn more about being active with back pain, check out these websites:

- The American Physical Therapy Association: moveforwardpt.com/Resources/Detail/recommended-treatments-low-back-pain-2
- North American Spine Society: knowyourback.org
- Physical Activity Guidelines: health.gov/paguidelines

Go to acsm.org/get-stay-certified/find-a-pro to find an ACSM certified exercise professional near you.

Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.

How will I get started **this week?** _____