

## Back Pain: Exercises for Low Back Pain



Low back pain is very common among adults. For most types of low back pain, you should stay active but avoid activities or positions that make your pain worse. Taking over-the-counter pain relievers and trying certain exercises may also help.

### Types of exercises that may help reduce low back pain

- Aerobic exercise, such as walking, swimming, and biking. Aerobic exercise is any activity that gets your heart rate up.
- Strengthening exercises. Strong stomach, back, and leg muscles better support your spine. This lowers the pressure on your spine and helps prevent injury.
- Stretching exercises. Stretching keeps your muscles and other supporting tissues flexible.

### Common questions about exercising for low back pain

#### Why is it important to do exercises for low back pain?

Exercise may not only help treat low back pain, but it may also help speed your recovery, keep

your back from being hurt again, and reduce your risk of disability from back pain.

#### When is it safe to exercise?

Start walking right away. Within 2 to 3 days after your pain starts, you may be ready to do gentle strengthening exercises and stretching if your doctor approves. You can probably start other aerobic exercise within 1 or 2 weeks.

#### Will exercise make my back pain worse?

Exercise helps to relieve low back pain and speed your recovery. Start each exercise slowly. Ease off the exercise if you start to have pain.

#### Are there any exercises I should not do?

Some exercises can make back pain worse. If you have low back pain, avoid:

- Straight-leg sit-ups. Bent-leg curl-ups are okay unless it hurts your back to do them.
- Lifting both legs while you are lying on your back (leg lifts).
- Lifting heavy weights above the waist (standing military press or biceps curls).
- Toe touches while you are standing.
- Exercises you do while bending at the waist, such as dead lifts.

#### How do I start?

Talk to your doctor or physical therapist about the best exercises for you and how to do them safely. Be sure to tell your doctor or physical therapist if you have any pain during exercise.

Try to exercise a little every day. Learn several stretching and strengthening exercises, and vary them from day to day. Choose an aerobic activity you enjoy, and get some type of aerobic exercise each day. Walking is a great exercise. Even a few minutes will be helpful. You can gradually increase your time.

## Which exercises reduce low back pain?

Stretching, strengthening, and aerobic exercises may help reduce your low back pain. Your doctor or physical therapist may give you a special set of exercises to do. Here are a few basic exercises to try:

**Aerobic exercise** includes walking, swimming, and biking. Non-weight-bearing exercise, such as swimming or walking in waist-deep water, tends to be a better choice for certain types of back pain.

**Strengthen** your core muscles. The core muscles are the muscles of your back, stomach, and buttocks. These muscles support your spine.

- Pull in your belly, and imagine pulling your belly button back toward your spine. Remember to keep your spine neutral while you do this—don't let your back bend forward. Hold this for about 6 seconds. Remember to keep breathing normally. Rest for up to 10 seconds. Repeat 8 to 12 times. You can do this exercise anywhere, in any position. Try it while you work at your desk, drive, or stand waiting for your turn at the drugstore.

- Alternate your arms and legs in the bird dog exercise. Start on the floor, on your hands and knees. Tighten your belly muscles. Raise one leg off the floor, and hold it straight out behind you. Be careful not to let your hip drop down, because that will twist your trunk. Hold for about 6 seconds, then lower your leg and switch to the other leg. Repeat 8 to 12 times on each leg. Over time, work up to holding for 10 to 30 seconds each time. When you feel stable and secure while your leg is raised, you can try raising the opposite arm straight out in front of you at the same time.

**Stretch** your back muscles.

- Get down on your hands and knees on the floor. Relax your neck and allow your head to droop. Round your back up toward the ceiling until you feel a nice stretch in your upper, middle, and lower back. Hold this stretch for as long as it feels comfortable, or about 15 to 30 seconds. Return to the starting position. Now let your back sway by pressing your stomach toward the floor and lifting your buttocks toward the ceiling. Hold this position for 15 to 30 seconds. Repeat, moving slowly between these two positions.