

Live Well to  
Learn Well

Web:  
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Appointments:  
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*Check web for hours,  
services, providers,  
and appointment  
information*

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Approximately 8 out of 10 people experience low back pain at some time in their lives. Although the pain may feel severe, most low back pain is not due to a serious problem.

## Symptoms

Low back pain is usually felt in the lower back and buttocks. Sometimes, irritation of nerve roots causes leg pain with numbness and tingling down to the toes, also known as sciatica.

## Risk factors

There are many risk factors that increase the chances of getting low back pain. The common risks result from lifestyle factors, such as sitting too much, being in poor physical condition, and bending and lifting improperly. Stress and lack of sleep can make the pain worse. As people age, they often feel more back pain due to weakened muscles and stiffening joints.

## Self-care

Follow these recommendations to care for your back when in pain:

- In a sudden onset of acute back pain, try lying face down. If the pain is too intense, you may need to rest in bed, lying on your back or side, for a day or two. Try a rolled towel under your waist when lying on your back.
- Avoid slouching, bending, twisting, lifting, and sitting. If you must sit, limit it to short periods.
- Non-prescription medications such as Ibuprofen (Motrin or Advil) or Naproxyn (Aleve) can be used to decrease pain and inflammation. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) can also be used to relieve pain, but it does not reduce inflammation. Follow the directions on the bottle. Discontinue use if you experience stomach upset.
- Your clinician may also prescribe medications such as pain relievers and/or muscle relaxants. Take them only as directed.
- Your clinician may refer you to Physical Therapy. To schedule an appointment with a physical therapist at Cornell Health, call 607-255-7217. The physical therapist will evaluate and determine the best strategy and treatment to reduce your back pain, often allowing you to return to activities more quickly and prevent a recurrence.

## Posture & precautions

Good posture can help prevent low back pain while poor postures can contribute to repeated



*Learn to avoid (and treat) lower back pain.*

episodes of back pain. Here are some suggestions for improving posture:

### Sitting

- Sit well back into a chair, resting against the back of the chair. To support the curve in your low back, called a lordosis, you may put a small rolled towel between your back and the chair.
- A portable lumbar roll, available for purchase at the Cornell Health pharmacy or in Physical Therapy at Schoellkopf Hall, is recommended. This roll can also be used when sitting in class and while driving or riding in a car.
- Use of a footrest can help relieve pressure in your low back.

### Standing

Avoid standing while bent over—even if only slightly bent—for long periods. If you must be bent over, try straightening up every few minutes and arching backward a few times.

### Working

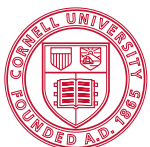
Change positions frequently. If you sit most of the day, get up and move around as often as you can. If you are standing for long periods, sit down during breaks.

### Exercise

Stay as active as possible, even if you are having pain. Getting regular exercise, such as walking or swimming will help you recover faster. Start slowly, allowing your body to loosen and warm up before increasing intensity.

### Sleeping

Try using a moderately firm mattress with a firm box spring or board underneath.



## When to seek help

Consult with a medical clinician if:

- You develop any new, prolonged or more severe symptoms, including dizziness, weakness, numbness or shooting pains down your leg.
- Your pain is worse or changes location.
- Your symptoms do not improve after several days of self-care treatment.
- You have any questions or concerns.

### Students:

If your need is urgent, and Cornell Health is closed, call 607-255-5155. The on-call nurse will be able to assist you.

## Exercises

The following exercises should help to decrease your back pain. However, if your pain is made worse or is referred down your leg, contact your clinician. Note: it is best to do the exercises on a firm surface.

- **Prone:** lie face down for two to three minutes, taking a few deep breaths and allowing your muscles to relax.



- **Prone on elbows:** lie face down and place your elbows under your shoulders so that you can lean on your forearms. Try to relax in this position for two to three minutes.



- **Prone press-up:** lying face down with hands under your shoulders, push the top half of your body up with your arms as far as pain permits. It is important to keep your pelvis, hips and legs relaxed as you do this, and to keep breathing normally. Slowly return your body to the floor and repeat up to 10 times, trying to raise your upper body a little further each time. You may repeat this exercise every few hours while you are awake as long as your pain continues to lessen.

