

Hospital Authority Health Guide

Back Pain

(1) Causes of Back Pain

- Common causes of back pain are falls, traffic accidents, industrial mishaps, violence and sports injuries. Poor posture or accidental injuries, together with stress in daily life and lack of exercise, may all lead to lower back pain. This is a common condition which reportedly affects about 80% of the population between the ages of 30 and 40.
- Back pain is usually caused by a minor sprain of muscles and ligaments. In most cases, patients can recover without treatment. However, even the slightest back pain may be a warning signal calling for prudent spine care to prevent worsening.

(2) Symptoms of Severe Back Pain

- Patients should seek medical attention promptly if they have the following symptoms:
 - the pain does not subside or intensifies;
 - the pain goes to the buttock, the thigh or even down to the foot;
 - fever or other symptoms;
 - voiding and bowel problems, e.g. incontinence or losing control;
 - weakness, decreased sensation or even numbness of the leg.

(3) Home Care Tips for Back Pain

- After treatment, patients should rest at home and take medication as prescribed. Bear in mind the following in your daily life:
 - bed rest for the first 1-2 days after the injury. Hot packs may be applied to help muscle relax;
 - lie face up while resting as far as possible, support your back with a firm mattress;
 - take medicine and apply ointment as prescribed;
 - avoid heavy lifting, bending or driving heavy vehicles as far as possible;
 - increase the activity level gradually to avoid getting injured again. Full recovery may take several weeks to several months;
 - you may be referred to physiotherapy service if necessary;
 - after recovery, a moderate amount of proper exercise can strengthen back muscles to reduce the risk of future back injuries.

(4) Prevention tips for Back Pain

- Stand up straight, with shoulders parallel to the hips, and abdomen pulled in, to maintain the natural curvature of the spine. This helps relax back muscles. When a lady wears high-heeled shoes, her body tilts forward and this forces her to lean backwards and arch her back to maintain balance. Avoid wearing high heels if possible.
- When sitting, keep your back straight with your feet rest on the floor, lower legs falling naturally and vertically, and buttocks touching the back of the chair. If the chair doesn't support your lower back's curve, place a small pillow behind your lower back. Chairs should not be too soft, too deep or too high. Do not slouch and cause the back to become arched. Avoid twisting your back often, revolving chair may help.
- Don't cross your legs for too long. When driving for a prolonged period, stop regularly and move around or bend your back backward.
- Your bed should be firm enough without sagging to give your body sufficient support. Use a 2-inch thick mattress and put a sheet of plywood underneath can give your back genuine rest. Pillow should not be too thick, just as high as the shoulders is appropriate. Do not get in or out of bed by twisting your back. To get in bed, sit on your side of the bed and gently lie down. To get out of bed, turn your trunk then rest your feet on the floor, then use your hands to prop up your body.
- Bending exerts great pressure on the spine and should be avoided. Always bend at your knees and squat down instead. Use step stools and suitable chairs to assist in daily activities. After bending posture, back stretching and relaxation exercises can help maintain the natural curvature of the spine.
- When lifting heavy objects, avoid hurting your back. Make use of leg and shoulder muscles to do the work. Keep the load close to you and avoid exceeding your limits. Do not twist your waist while turning, turn your whole body instead.
- Avoid holding prolonged unaccustomed postures, or making sudden waist movements or forceful exertions.
- Exercise can strengthen muscles and slow down degenerative changes in the spine. Do warm up exercise properly beforehand to avoid hurting your back. Physical activities like swimming, cycling and walking are good systemic exercise whereas simple and slow-moving exercise such as tai chi and morning stretching are suitable for the elderly.