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## Ask the Doctor



BY DR. MARSHALL TOLBERT, MD, PHD, FAANS

### How common is low back pain?

Low back pain is one of the most common reasons to visit a doctor, third after skin disorders and joint disorders. Worldwide, low back pain is the single leading cause of disability. It is estimated that 50% of working Americans will have significant low back pain each year, with an estimated 264 million work days lost to low back pain each year! While the incidence of low back pain increases with age, it affects all age groups, from the very young onward.

### What causes low back pain?

The causes of low back pain are numerous. However, the vast majority of low back pain is related to injury to the muscles, tendons and ligaments of the back. This is commonly referred to lumbar strain or mechanical low back pain. Injury to these structures elicit pain, which may lead to muscle spasm as the muscles tighten up to try to prevent more injury. Often this results in painful "knots" in the muscle. Factors associated with lumbar injury include sedentary lifestyle, poor lifting technique with bending forward and lifting with our backs instead of bending at the knees, or lifting heavy objects. Poor posture with slumping forward is very common; this places more tension along the lumbar spine, straining the muscles, ligaments and tendons.

### I trail jog, hike and ride my mountain bike on weekends, will this prevent me from having low back pain?

Excursive is important for low back health, however, the "weekend warrior" may be at increased risk of low back pain. Elevated level of activity on an intermittent basis stresses the muscles, ligament, and other structures which are overall not conditioned for such activity. It is important to maintain a regular exercise regimen, and don't forget to stretch before and after activity!

### My back hurts, what should I do?

Activity as tolerated, at decreased levels, is considered the mainstay of treatment for acute episodes of low back pain. Bedrest for 1-2 days may be beneficial, but prolonged bed rest may actually worsen the pain and prolong recovery by promoting muscle stiffness/spasm. Elastic braces/corsets are controversial, as there use may decondition the back muscles, making them more prone to injury. Some find massage and either heat or ice to be beneficial. Over the counter NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory) medication may provide pain relief, just remember they are for short term use. Magnesium

supplementation may help as well. While most episodes of low back pain will resolve in days to weeks, sometimes the pain persists past this. Nagging persistent pain lasting for weeks with no improvement may need evaluation.

### What can I do to prevent low back pain?

Episodes of low back pain may not be completely preventable. However, as most episodes of low back pain is related to soft tissue injury, core muscle strengthening and stretching are the mainstay of prevention. However, our daily lives are hectic, balancing family and work leaves little time for exercise. Try incorporating exercises in your daily activity, such as taking the stairs, walking instead of driving short distances, taking a "10,000 steps a day" challenge. Try yoga, it incorporates strength and flexibility. Have a friend join you, this will keep you motivated. Good lifting habits with bending your legs and not your back to pick up boxes and other heavy objects, good posture to avoid slumping forward, good ergonomics at work, consider a chair with good lumbar support, or even standing instead of sitting.

### When should I call my doctor?

Some back pain situations are considered "Red Flags" for calling your Doctor. Loss of bowel or bladder function or leg weakness should be considered an emergent condition, and needs to be evaluated right away. Severe low back pain if your have or have had cancer may indicate the cancer has involved the vertebra; likewise if you have osteoporosis/"thin" or "weak" bones, sudden pain particularly with bending over or lifting, sometimes associated with a "pop", may indicate a compression fracture. Pain in which you are unable to get in a comfortable position, or associated with a high fever needs medical evaluation. Pain or numbness radiating down your leg may be indicative of a herniated disk and should be evaluated by a Physician. While most episodes of low back pain resolve within days to a few weeks, persistent pain should be evaluated by a Physician.

*Dr. Tolbert practices at Sierra Neurosurgery Group at 5590 Kietzke Lane with a speciality in endovascular neurosurgery and general neurosurgery with an emphasis on brain tumors, pituitary tumors, stereotactic radiosurgery, and complex spine. From the heartland of Ohio to the outlands of Alaska, and now home in the West, Marshall Tolbert, MD, PhD, FAANS has pioneered a remarkable career helping save people's lives.*

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