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Conquering back pain with physical activity

More than 80 per cent of adults experience back pain at some point in their lives. In the past, it was commonly believed that rest was important for recovery from back pain; however, we now know that's not the case. Resting through a back injury can prolong your recovery. The longer you rest, the harder it becomes to resume your regular activities.

The good news is that staying active can actually be a great method for treating back pain. Staying active, as well as practicing proper posture and lifting techniques, speeds up the recovery process and decreases the risk of chronic disability. This article explains

- why activity is good for helping you recover from back pain,
- how to recover from back pain and prevent it from recurring, and
- how to live a more active lifestyle.

Understanding back pain

Experts generally describe back pain as either acute or chronic. **Acute pain** is the most common type, generally lasting less than six months. Most episodes of acute back pain result from muscle strains or sprains. The pain can be most severe right after the injury or it can get gradually worsen over hours or days.

Common causes of acute back pain include:

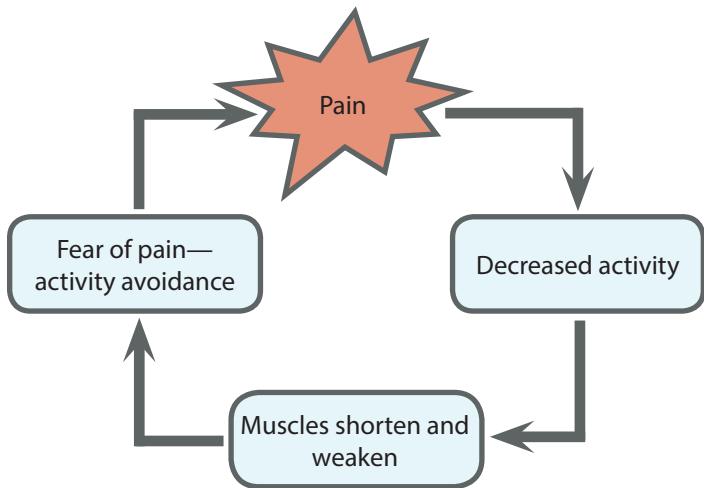
- poor sitting or standing posture;
- prolonged, awkward positions such as bending forward;
- improper lifting; or
- sudden, strenuous movements.

Chronic back pain continues after the injury has healed and generally lasts more than six months. This type of pain is rare, occurring in about five per cent of cases. Chronic pain is not usually resolved by standard types of treatment and may be associated with other conditions such as arthritis or nerve problems.

The cycle of pain and inactivity

Inactivity can prolong pain. When we're inactive, we become stiff and our muscles and bones weaken. We can become depressed, which in turn can make the pain feel worse. The

earlier you get active, the sooner you'll be able to resume your regular activities.



How to recover from back pain and prevent flare-ups

Pain can be scary, but it doesn't necessarily indicate tissue damage or harm. You may have discomfort during activity, but your discomfort may be due in part to shortened tissues.

Gradual increases in activity will help heal your tissue and decrease your sensitivity to pain. Start slowly; try a short walk or some gentle stretches. Increase your activity level as you're able to do so.

When you have a flare-up, passive treatments like rest and applying heat or ice can help. However, benefits from these treatments alone are generally short-term.

To get long-lasting results, get active and resume as many of your regular activities as you can. Continue to complete household tasks such as cleaning and getting groceries; take your time and take breaks as you need them. Take an active role in your recovery—keep moving to reduce your chances of developing chronic problems.

You can be active while you have pain; in fact, exercise often makes you feel better by releasing endorphins and other chemicals that naturally reduce pain. Exercise will also help you to maintain a healthy weight and reduce stress on your joints.

Gentle, low-impact activities such as walking or swimming can help to reduce your pain while increasing strength, endurance and flexibility.

When your pain subsides, try activities that target core (stomach and back) strength, such as Pilates. Developing core strength is essential to the health of your back. Strong, balanced core muscles help you maintain proper posture and reduce stress on your spine. Increasing your core strength will also help make you more resistant to future episodes of back pain.

Another important part of preventing flare-ups is protecting your joints. To do this, we suggest

- breaking up repetitive or continuous tasks by doing another activity or taking a break,
- practicing proper body mechanics and getting help when lifting and carrying heavy or awkward loads, and
- being aware of your posture when standing and sitting—try to change your body position frequently.

How to live a more active lifestyle

The key to getting active and staying active is to find activities you enjoy and make them part of your lifestyle.

You don't have to use exercise equipment or follow strict routines, and there's no need to limit yourself to activities that specifically target your back. Walking, biking and swimming help increase your spine strength, along with many other health benefits.

Whichever activities you choose, aim to do them three or more times a week. Consult your health care provider before beginning an exercise program.

We suggest the following:

- Check out the opportunities available through your local recreation programs. Look for low-impact fitness and aquafitness classes.

- Get maps of the walking and biking trails in your area. Plan a regular walk or bike ride at lunch time or after work; enjoy the outdoors with a friend or the family pet.
- Seek assistance from a health care professional, such as a physiotherapist or exercise therapist, or personal trainer to establish a home workout routine.
- Visit your local gym or wellness centre. Staff can help you find a program or fitness opportunity that's right for you.

Being active is key to recovering from back pain.

Understanding your pain and the benefits of staying active will help to ease your fears of causing further harm and will enable you to take an active role in recovery and prevention. Finding activities you enjoy will help you recover quickly and reduce the likelihood of future flare-ups.

Learn more

[Back pain and physical activity](#)

Articles about back pain and physical activity from the Alberta Centre for Active Living's WellSpring newsletter.

[Back to Basics: A guide to good back health](#)

A booklet from the Alberta Workers' Compensation Board about maintaining good back health. It includes posture tips and much more.

[BackActive.ca](#)

A government-sponsored web site about how to walk away from back pain.

[Exercises for a Healthy Back](#)

Information from the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety.

Content provided courtesy of Alberta Health's Healthy U initiative.



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