

# Back Pain Isn't a "Life Sentence": How to Navigate your Health Recovery (Part 1 of 2)

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It is true that nobody wants a lifetime of chronic back pain. However, back pain has become the most common reason that people see doctors. In fact, four out of five adults will experience back pain sometime during their lifetime. In particular, back pain is so prevalent that it affects more than 75% of the population and persistent or chronic back pain is now recognized as a "chronic disease" by the World Health Organization because of its complex nature and the huge impact it has on our health, productivity and our economy.

Pain in the lower back is particularly common, although it can be felt anywhere along the spine, from the neck down to the hips. The good news is that simple mechanical back pain is very common and normally improves within a few weeks or so if not caused by anything serious; however, some back pain is complex and can become chronic or keep coming back.

Although back pain does have a negative impact on your mobility and activities of daily living ("ADLs"), do try to avoid the incorrect belief that back pain is an inevitable part of life and a constant cause of suffering. In particular, older people with chronic back pain have considerable ADL problems. In this case, clinicians should always pay close attention to the impact of pain intensity, anxiety and depression on ADLs.

## Key Points for Back Pain

- Back pain is the number two reason people visit their doctor - colds and flu are # 1.
- Acute pain is the most common type of back pain and lasts no longer than 6 weeks.
- Some lifestyle triggers do increase the risk for back pain.
- Back pain may be a symptom of a medical condition.
- Exercise, knowledge about prevention, proper diet, and hot/ cold packs can help with back pain.

On a positive note, with the correct diagnosis, treatment plan, rehabilitation and self-management, the relentless cycle of pain, impairment in ADLs, and drug use can be broken.

Overall, there are many contributing factors to consider when examining back pain beyond the simple notion that "my back went out". Also, it is important to distinguish between chronic pain and acute pain. Chronic pain is usually much more complex in terms of causation and treatment planning. Moreover, studies have demonstrated that back pain is often a co-morbidity associated with another illness most commonly depression, anxiety, diabetes, heart disease, fibromyalgia and obesity.

**In this month's article, we look at common concerns surrounding back pain. In next month's article, we will examine rehabilitation treatment strategies for back pain.**

Also, it is important to note that in some cases, no clear cause can be identified for your back pain despite common imaging technologies (e.g., MRI scans, X-rays and

CT scans). Your clinician may not be able to tell you exactly why you are experiencing chronic back pain. In these cases, imaging tests may show certain abnormalities of the spine (e.g., herniated discs) and not be related to your pain; however, please keep in mind that certain abnormalities are sometimes found in people who have no pain or symptoms at all.

In terms of self-management, please keep in mind that everything is interconnected. Your simple mechanical back pain just might be caused by biomechanics being compromised (e.g. due to injury) leading to the muscles of your back doing more work than they should to keep the spine upright or moving correctly. If this is the case, you should work with your physical therapist to diagnose and correct the specific imbalances that are over-taxing your back. For example, new moms often suffer from low back pain as a result of (a) the stress placed on biomechanics of the body during pregnancy and (b) after the child is born resulting from new habits from caring for a baby (e.g., holding the baby on only one side of your body and/or slouching over while nursing) may lead to muscle imbalances.

Finally, consider that stress and/or anxiety can sometimes cause tight muscles and knots in your neck and upper back and lead to back spasms. Depression and anxiety often manifest with physical symptoms. Even worse, depression and anxiety may make any existing back pain feel even worse. If stress may be causing your back pain, try to add yoga, intensive stretching, meditation and/or deep breathing to your daily or weekly routines.

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