

# Managing low back pain: Treatment options



## Back surgery may not be the only or best option

### The effectiveness of non-invasive treatments

Evidence is growing that non-invasive treatment options for low back pain can be better alternatives to potentially risky surgery, with potentially better outcomes. Here is a list of non-invasive therapies you may want to consider before surgery.

#### Keep moving

Limit activities or exercise that cause pain or make it worse, but do not lay down all day. Lying down if you have back pain may actually make things worse. Slowly increase physical activity as you can. It is usually considered better to walk than to stay in bed. Unless specifically advised against by your doctor, try to walk for 10 to 20 minutes at a time every 2 to 3 hours. Be sure to walk on level surfaces, not on hills or stairs. Walk quickly if you can, and swing your arms as you walk. If you have to sit, it's recommended to change positions every 30 minutes and take breaks.<sup>1</sup>

#### Ice and heat

There is no rule about using heat or ice for your back pain. In general, use cold packs to help alleviate some back pain and hot packs to increase blood flow and help you heal.<sup>1</sup> You can try each to see which works best for you to help relieve your pain.

#### Pain medicine

For most low back pain, you can take over-the-counter pain medicine such as acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol) or ibuprofen (e.g. Advil or Motrin) or naproxen (e.g. Aleve).<sup>2</sup> If your doctor prescribes a muscle relaxant for severe pain, carefully follow the instructions for taking this medication.<sup>2</sup>

### Additional alternatives to consider before surgery

Many types of healthcare providers offer back pain treatment options. These treatments are sometimes considered part of complementary or integrative medicine because they are often viewed as “outside” mainstream medical therapies. Some therapies are based on ancient healing techniques, while others are based on more modern approaches to rehabilitation and pain management. Many people find relief from these therapies, and some studies have shown that patients opting for these therapies can have the same outcomes as those with surgical interventions, but without the inherent risk and expense of surgery.<sup>2</sup>

### Physical therapy

- Try physical therapy to help strengthen the muscles that support the back. Physical therapy (also known as physiotherapy) uses exercises and equipment to reduce or eliminate pain and rehabilitate the spine. Learn to move your body the right way when going about your day, especially when you lift, push, or pull something.<sup>1</sup>

### Manual manipulation

- Physical therapists use manual manipulation or “manual therapy” to apply pressure on muscle tissue and manipulate joints in an attempt to decrease back pain caused by muscle spasm, muscle tension, and joint dysfunction.<sup>3</sup>

### Mobilization

- Mobilization uses slower (versus manipulation), measured movements to twist, pull, or push your bones and joints into position to help restore flexibility and range of motion.<sup>3</sup>

### Therapeutic massage

- Massage therapy improves blood flow, releases tense muscles and decreases overall stiffness in your soft tissues.<sup>4</sup>

### Acupuncture

- Acupuncture is a traditional Chinese medicine technique that uses very fine metal needles inserted into the body at specific points to stimulate the body’s natural healing.<sup>5</sup>

It may take time to find an alternative therapy that works for you. Start with your healthcare provider for advice on which alternative medical approaches to consider, and where to start looking for a qualified practitioner in your area.

If you do not respond to nonsurgical therapies after six weeks, your healthcare provider may recommend a local spinal injection such as an epidural corticosteroid injection into the lumbar area of the back to help relieve inflammation that may be contributing to your pain.<sup>6</sup>

However, it’s important to note research has not shown that local injections are effective in controlling acute or chronic low back pain that does not spread down the leg.<sup>7</sup> As with any injection, it’s important to talk to your doctor about your back care options.

It is very important to consult your doctor before beginning any of the above therapy programs. You want to make sure that the therapy you choose is appropriate for your back problem. You also want to be sure that your doctor first rules out any underlying conditions that may be causing your back pain. Lastly, if you don’t find relief from any of these lifestyle changes and therapies, you and your doctor may want to discuss surgical alternatives.

1. National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, “Back Pain,” accessed at [www.niams.nih.gov](http://www.niams.nih.gov), last reviewed: July 2019

2. Qaseem, A. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, “Noninvasive Treatments for Acute, Subacute, and Chronic Low Back Pain: A Clinical Practice Guideline from the American College of Physicians.” Volume 166, Issue 7, 4 April 2017, pages: 514-530

3. National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, “Chiropractic: In Depth,” accessed at [nccih.nih.gov](http://nccih.nih.gov), last updated: April 2019

4. *Pain Medicine*, “Real-world massage therapy produces meaningful effectiveness signal for primary care patients with chronic low back pain: Results of a repeated measures cohort study,” July 2017

5. Mayo Clinic, “Acupuncture,” March 3, 2020

6. Firestein & Kelley’s *Textbook of Rheumatology*, 11th Edition, “Low back pain,” 2021, published July 2020

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