



CSAA Insurance Group,  
a AAA Insurer



# When back pain slows you down, start here.

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**A POCKET GUIDE**  
to understanding, treating and  
preventing back pain and injuries

The information provided in this document is not a substitute for regular physical examinations or medical treatment. In addition, the information in this document should not be considered medical advice. You should always consult with your personal physician before beginning any exercise program.



## Ouch! My back hurts!

As scary as back pain can be, there are proven ways to relieve it. If you've had back pain before, maybe you've been to the doctor and gotten a prescription for pain relief (i.e., opioids), or perhaps you've even considered back surgery. But those are not your only options.

Learn more as you browse this pocket guide, print it for handy reference or visit [CSAIGbackpain.uhc.com](https://www.csaai.org/backpain.uhc.com) for the comprehensive guide.

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# What do I do right now?

If your back is hurting, here are some things you can do right now to feel better today and for the future.

## 1. Keep moving!

Staying in bed for more than a day or 2 can actually make your pain worse.<sup>1</sup> Try easy stretching exercises (see page 13) or take a walk.<sup>2</sup>

## BACK FACT

Strong evidence shows that people who continue their activities without bed rest following the onset of low back pain appeared to have better back flexibility than those who rested in bed for a week.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Apply heat or ice.

Hot or cold packs may be soothing to your sore, stiff back.

- First, use ice (cold packs) for the first 2 or 3 days to help reduce inflammation and numb deep pain
- Then use heat to reduce muscle spasms<sup>1,3</sup>

## 3. Take over-the-counter pain relievers.

These may include ibuprofen (Advil®, Motrin®), naproxen (Aleve®) or acetaminophen (Tylenol®). Ibuprofen and naproxen have the added benefit of helping to reduce inflammation. Be sure to follow label directions.<sup>1</sup>

## 4. Apply topical pain relievers.

Available in a variety of creams, salves, sprays or ointments you can rub into your skin at the site of your pain. Popular over-the-counter brands include BENGAY® and Icy Hot®.<sup>2</sup>

## 5. Change your sleeping position.

Try sleeping on your side in a curled-up, fetal position with a pillow or rolled towel between your knees to help relieve pressure on your back.<sup>1</sup>

## 6. Exercise, but don't overdo it!

After a few days of recovery, try light exercise. Keep to easy stretching for the first 2 to 3 weeks, and then slowly increase your intensity. Stay away from exercise and activities that involve heavy lifting or twisting for about 6 weeks.<sup>1</sup>



### BACK FACT

Evidence supports the short- and long-term benefits of yoga to help ease chronic low back pain.<sup>2</sup>

## What kind of pain is it?<sup>3</sup>

Understanding the type of pain you are experiencing can help you know where to go for care and treatment options.

- **Acute pain** is pain that hits you suddenly after an accident, a fall or lifting something heavy. It is the most common type of back pain and lasts no longer than 6 weeks.
- **Chronic pain** may come on either quickly or slowly and lasts a long time, generally longer than 3 months. It is much less common than acute pain.

Note: Sources can be found on the last page of this guide.

## Back pain continuum of care:

### TREATMENTS FOR ACUTE PAIN (short-term pain)



**Acetaminophen, aspirin or ibuprofen**

**Movement**

to ease stiffness, relieve pain

### TREATMENTS FOR CHRONIC PAIN (long-term pain)



**Hot or cold packs**

**Physical therapy and exercise**

**Behavior modification and healthy habits**



**Spinal manipulation**

chiropractic

**TENS treatment**

mild electrical pulses to the nerves

**Acupuncture**

thin needles to relieve pain

**Acupressure**

applying pressure to certain areas



**Traction**

using pulleys and weights to stretch the back



**Medication**

pain relievers, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, injections



**Surgery**

Treatments are listed, top to bottom, from least invasive and *likely less expensive* to most invasive and *likely more expensive*.

# Where can I go for help?



## Your first call for answers — your UnitedHealthcare Health Advantage advocate

- For help deciding if you need to see a health care provider and what type of provider to see
- Talk to a nurse 7 a.m.–10 p.m. CT, Monday–Friday

Call **1-877-835-9856**, TTY **711**, or visit [myuhc.com](https://myuhc.com)®.



## UnitedHealthcare 24/7 Virtual Visits

- Visit with a doctor for non-urgent health care and prescription needs.
- Available as an integrated experience through the UnitedHealthcare® app.
- Available 24/7; no appointment needed.

Virtual Visits are also available through Amwell® and the Doctor on Demand app.



## Kaiser DHMO Virtual Visits

Contact Kaiser directly for answers regarding virtual visits, health education and condition management services.

Call **1-800-464-4000** or visit [kp.org](https://kp.org).



## Urgent care

- May be appropriate if you've injured your back after hours or on the weekend and don't want to (or can't) wait to see your regular provider
- No appointment is needed for urgent care

## Urgent care *continued*

- An urgent care doctor may request a brief health history, conduct a medical exam and possibly order X-rays or other diagnostic tests. He or she may also prescribe medication to help relieve any immediate pain and will likely ask you to follow up with your primary care provider.

## Emergency room (ER)

Visit the ER (or call 911) if you have a back injury or condition that is severe and possibly life threatening, such as but not limited to:

- Back pain due to a fall or injury
- Running a fever with severe back pain
- Experiencing bowel or bladder problems along with back pain

## Back pain warning signs<sup>4</sup>

On rare occasion, back pain signals a serious medical problem. Seek immediate care if you have severe back pain and:



You experience new bowel or bladder problems



You also have a fever



Your pain is due to a fall, blow to your back or other injury

You should also contact a doctor if your back pain is severe and doesn't improve with rest or if:



Your pain spreads down 1 or both legs



You experience weakness, numbness or tingling in 1 or both legs



You have unexplained weight loss

Note: Sources can be found on the last page of this guide.

## A variety of health care providers may be seen for back pain:



### Chiropractor

May be able to help relieve back pain with spinal manipulations or other treatments — and without drugs or surgery.

### BACK FACT

The federal Agency for Health Care Research and Quality recommends spinal manipulation as the only safe and effective, drugless form of initial professional treatment for acute low back problems in adults.



### Physical therapist

Uses a variety of treatments to help you improve your movement, reduce your back pain and achieve long-term health benefits.<sup>4</sup> Studies have shown that for adults with low back pain, exercise therapy can improve function and help people return to work and life activities faster.<sup>5</sup>



### Acupuncturist

Treats chronic pain by stimulating points on the body using a variety of techniques including pricking the skin with thin, solid, metallic needles that are manipulated by the hands or by electrical stimulation.<sup>6</sup> Some people with low back pain report that acupuncture helps relieve their symptoms.<sup>4</sup>

### BACK FACT

For patients with chronic low back pain, the American College of Physicians recommends initially selecting from several non-drug therapies that include acupuncture.





## Your primary care provider (PCP)

Your PCP knows your health history and may be in a position to diagnose the cause of your back pain and help you get back on a healthier track. He or she may:

- Provide things you can do at home to help alleviate and eliminate the pain
- Refer you for physical therapy, chiropractic care, or to an orthopedic surgeon or other specialist
- Order additional diagnostic tests, such as X-rays or an MRI. Note that imaging tests are not warranted in most cases; however, under certain circumstances, imaging may be ordered to rule out specific causes of pain, including tumors and spinal stenosis.<sup>2</sup>
- Provide a prescription for muscle relaxers, painkillers or antidepressants



### **BACK FACT**

Prescription opioids may be used to treat chronic and acute pain and, when used appropriately, can be an important component of treatment. However, serious risks are associated with their use, including misuse, addiction, overdose and death. Physicians have begun prescribing opioids less frequently.<sup>7</sup>

Note: Sources can be found on the last page of this guide.



## Orthopedic surgeon and other specialists

- **A pain management specialist:** Some of the treatments recommended may include medications, nerve blocks, spinal injections and other interventional techniques.<sup>8</sup>
- **Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) specialists:** May recommend a treatment plan that combines physical and occupational therapy, exercise training, movement and activity modification, adaptive equipment and assistive devices along with local and systemic medications.<sup>9</sup>
- **An orthopedic surgeon or neurosurgeon:** Can provide nonsurgical treatment and/or perform one of numerous types of surgeries. If you are considering surgery for your back pain, you'll want to make sure you've tried all other options first and get a second opinion.



Note: Sources can be found on the last page of this guide.



## Alternative and complementary health care approaches\*

Recommendations for patients with chronic low back pain by the American College of Physicians include the initial selection of non-drug therapy with exercise, multidisciplinary rehabilitation and the following:<sup>10</sup>

- Acupuncture
- Mindfulness-based stress reduction
- Tai chi
- Yoga
- Massage
- Motor control exercise (MCE)
- Progressive relaxation
- Electromyography biofeedback
- Low-level laser therapy
- Operant therapy
- Cognitive behavioral therapy
- Spinal manipulation

## Health care approaches

**Alternative:** When non-mainstream practices are used in place of conventional medicine, it's considered *alternative*.

**Complementary:** When non-mainstream practices are used together with conventional medicine, it is considered *complementary*.

\*Member benefit coverage varies. Please refer to your medical plan's specific information for current coverage information. Some of the recommended alternative approaches listed above should be avoided and/or used with extra caution in the elderly population. Alternatives aren't intended to replace a clinician's clinical judgment. Please consult with your provider based on your specific situation.

Note: Sources can be found on the last page of this guide.

# What causes back pain?

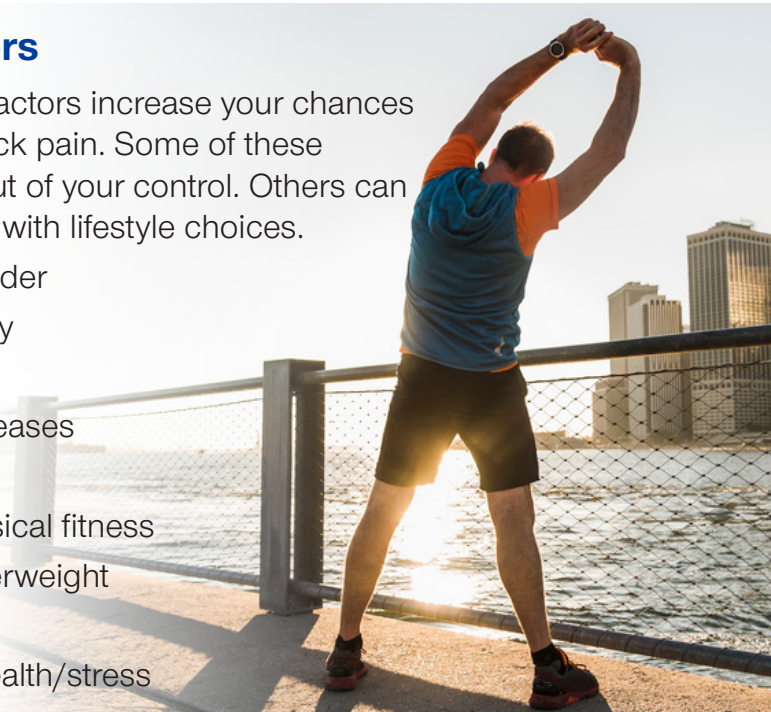
Do you know what's causing your back pain? If this has happened before, you may have a pretty good idea. Most back pain is mechanical in nature, meaning the source of the pain may be in the spinal joints, discs, vertebrae or soft tissues. Here are examples of common mechanical causes of low back pain:

- Muscle or ligament sprains and strains
- Spinal stenosis (narrowing of the spinal column)
- Spondylosis (a degeneration of the spine usually associated with age)
- Herniated or ruptured discs
- Traumatic injury
- Inflammatory diseases of the joints
- Osteoporosis

## Risk factors

Certain risk factors increase your chances of getting back pain. Some of these factors are out of your control. Others can be managed with lifestyle choices.

- Getting older
- Pregnancy
- Heredity
- Other diseases
- Your job
- Poor physical fitness
- Being overweight
- Smoking
- Mental health/stress



# How can I avoid back injuries and back pain?

Here are 10 things you can do to help prevent back injuries and back pain.



## 1. Stretch

Stretching may lower your risk of injury and help you improve your range of motion and flexibility. Better flexibility may:<sup>4</sup>

- Improve your performance in physical activities
- Decrease your risk of injuries
- Help your joints move through their full range of motion
- Enable your muscles to work most effectively



## 2. Exercise

Regular, low-impact aerobic activities 30 minutes a day, 5 times per week can help increase muscle strength and flexibility.<sup>2</sup>

- Walking
- Swimming
- Bike riding



## 3. Strengthen your core

When you strengthen your back and abdominal muscles, they will work better together and help prevent back pain and injury — and help you look and feel better in the long run.<sup>4</sup>



#### 4. Maintain good posture

Proper posture can help prevent back pain.

- When standing, don't slouch
- If you must stand for long periods, try placing a foot on a low footstool to help take some of the load off your lower back
- If you must sit for extended periods of time, choose a seat with good lower back support, armrests and a swivel base. Try placing a pillow or rolled towel in the small of your back to maintain its normal curve. Keep your knees and hips level and be sure to get up and walk around frequently.
- At home or work, make sure your work surfaces are at a comfortable height<sup>2,4</sup>



#### 5. Lift safely

- Make your legs do the work and give your back a break
- Don't lift anything too heavy! (Ask for help when the load is too much for one person.)
- Bend your knees and keep your back straight
- Lift from the knees, pull the stomach muscles in and keep the head down and in line with a straight back
- When lifting, keep objects close to the body
- Do not twist when lifting<sup>2</sup>



#### 6. Wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes

If you're going to be walking or standing for any length of time, do not wear high heels, but instead opt for shoes with cushioned soles.<sup>2</sup>



## 7. Pay attention to your sleep position

Try sleeping on your side with your knees drawn up in a fetal position. It can help open up your spine joints and release pressure on your back. Always sleep on a firm mattress.<sup>2</sup>



## 8. Eat a balanced diet and maintain a healthy weight

Try to follow a well-balanced diet with proper nutrition. Not only will you feel better, but it will help you stay at a healthy weight and avoid extra strain on your back. Extra weight around your waistline can strain your lower back muscles. Plus, a diet with the right amount of calcium, phosphorus and vitamin D helps to promote new bone growth.

- Choose a variety of nutrient-dense foods from each food group in recommended amounts
- Limit calories from added sugars and saturated fats and reduce sodium intake
- Shift to healthier food and beverage choices



Note: Sources can be found on the last page of this guide.



## 9. Quit smoking

There are so many reasons to quit smoking. Here are just a few that concern your back:<sup>2</sup>

- Smoking reduces blood flow to the lower spine, which can contribute to spinal disc degeneration
- Smoking also increases the risk of osteoporosis and impedes healing
- Coughing due to heavy smoking also may cause back pain



## 10. Manage your stress

There are many healthy ways of dealing with stress, including regular exercise; talking with friends; or relaxation techniques, such as yoga, meditation or massage.

**Take advantage of your Employee Assistance Program, offered through SupportLinc, to help with stress management.**

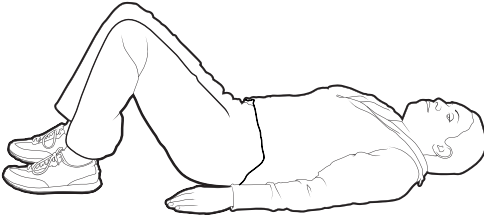
Call SupportLinc at **1-888-881-5462** or visit [SupportLinc.com](https://www.supportlinc.com) (group code: CSAA) to learn more about the mindfulness or stress management programs and services available.



Try these exercises at home to help relieve low back pain and strengthen your core muscles:

## KNEES-TO-CHEST

(5-10 Repetitions)

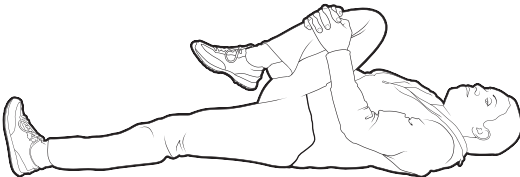


Lie on your back with your knees bent.



Keep one foot flat on the floor while raising the opposite knee to your chest.

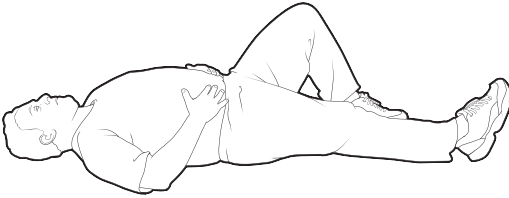
- Count slowly to 10, then slowly bring your leg back down.
- Switch knees and repeat.



**Variation:** If it feels better on your lower back, lie with one knee bent and one leg flat on the ground.

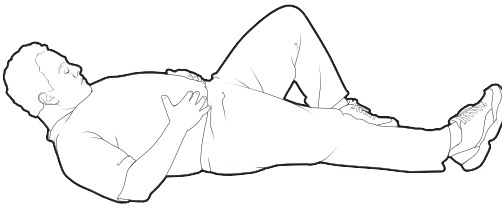
## CURL-UP

(5-10 Repetitions)



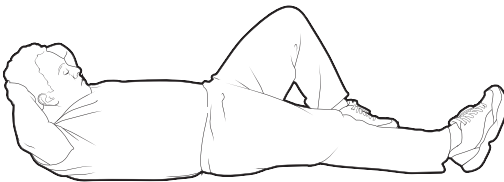
**Lie on your back, with your hands on your abdominal muscles.**

- Bend one leg, keeping the other leg straight on the floor.



**Lower your chin as you lift your head and shoulders off the ground.**

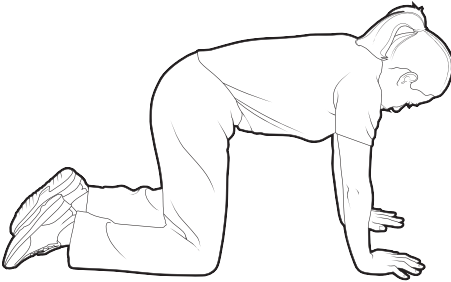
- Lower shoulders and head back to the floor.
- This is not a sit-up; your body will tell you when you've gone far enough. You will feel it in your abdominal muscles.



**Variation:** Put your hands beneath your head instead of on your abdominal muscles. Keep the arch in your lower back.

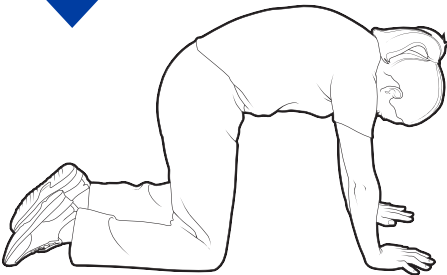
## THE ARCH

(5-10 Repetitions)



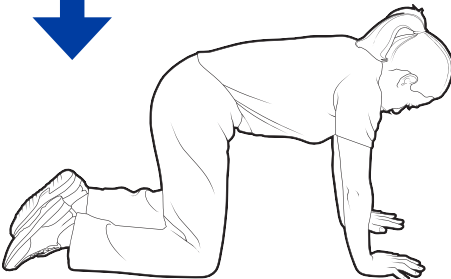
### Start on your hands and knees.

- Knees should be directly under your hips. Hands should be directly below your shoulders, fingers spread wide with middle fingers pointing straight ahead.
- Keep your arms straight. Do not lock your elbows. Tighten your abdominal muscles.
- Your head, neck and back should be in a straight line.



### Start by looking at the floor.

- Tuck in your tailbone.
- Tighten your buttocks and abdominal muscles.
- Arch your lower back up, and let your head drop down.
- Keep abdominal and thigh muscles tight and hold for a few seconds.



### As you relax, move toward the starting position.

- Lift your head and look forward.
- Lift your tailbone — don't tuck it like you did in the previous step.
- Your back will "scoop" rather than "arch." Hold for a few seconds.
- Return to the starting position.

# Your CSAA IG resources

CSAA IG provides benefits and resources to help you tackle back and joint pain and keep you at your best, offered at no additional cost to you.

## **UnitedHealthcare Health Advantage advocates: 1-877-835-9856, TTY 711**

With UnitedHealthcare Health Advantage, members have access to nurses and health advocates. Reach a registered nurse for information on care options, understanding symptoms, finding a doctor, hospital, urgent care center or other health questions.

## **CSAA IG well-being support**

For additional support on your well-being journey, please reach out to the [Living Healthy Team](#).

Well-being specialists can:

- Connect you to valuable resources such as:
  - [Living Healthy Resources](#)  
(Go to Voyage > Search Living Healthy to access the Living Healthy homepage)
  - [Mental well-being tools and resources](#)  
(Go to Voyage > Search Mental well-being)
- Offer support as you work toward an even healthier life
- Help you understand how to [earn well-being rewards and savings](#) for many activities included in this guide

## 2nd.MD Medical Second Opinion

With 2nd.MD, you can connect with a board-certified, expert specialist for a medical second opinion via phone or video at no cost to you and your family covered under a company medical plan. Get expert advice when you or an eligible dependent has questions about:

- A new or existing diagnosis or treatment plan
- Possible surgery
- Chronic condition
- Your medications

Request a consult at **1-866-269-3534**. To activate your membership, go to [2nd.MD/CSAA](https://2nd.MD/CSAA).

## Mental well-being and work life program

SupportLinc's Licensed Professional Counselors and Work/Life specialists can help with personal, family and work-related issues. Access up to 10 free in-person, video, phone or text sessions per issue.

This is a confidential, no cost service available 24/7/365 to you and your family members.

Learn more or access SupportLinc by calling **1-888-881-5462** or visit [supportlinc.com](https://supportlinc.com) (group code: csaa).

## Virgin Pulse

Virgin Pulse is an easy-to-use online program and app that helps you make good-for-you decisions. Healthy habits can reduce your risk for certain diseases, increase your focus, and help you feel great! Plus, you'll get to join friendly competitions with your coworkers, and challenge yourself to attain your wellness goals all while earning rewards along the way.

New members can enroll at [join.virginpulse.com/CSAAIG](https://join.virginpulse.com/CSAAIG). Returning members, visit [member.virginpulse.com](https://member.virginpulse.com) or log into the Virgin Pulse mobile app.

## Real Appeal® (for UnitedHealthcare members only)

Real Appeal is a free 52-week online weight-loss program, customized to what works for you. With Real Appeal, you learn simple steps to help you transform supported by coach-led online group sessions and success kit tools and resources, delivered to your door.

For more information, visit [csaaig.realappeal.com](https://csaaig.realappeal.com).

## Sources

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- <sup>5</sup> American Physical Therapy Association. Beyond Opioids: How physical therapy can transform pain management to improve health. An American Physical Therapy Association White Paper. June 1, 2018. <https://www.apta.org/advocacy/issues/opioid-epidemic-safe-pain-management/beyond-opioids-white-paper>.
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