

LOW BACK PAIN



Hi. My name is Dr Robert Dweck and I'm a family doctor.

Today we're talking about **back pain**. I'm going to give you the family doctors perspective with some tips you may not hear elsewhere. Back pain is the number two reasons for all visits to ambulatory care doctors (respiratory infections being number one) and the number one cause worldwide for disability. So, I am going to break this important discussion up into 3 broad topics to help you better understand what it is all about.

These 3 topics are: acute mechanical low back pain, which involves the muscles, second, acute low back pain involving discs, nerves, vertebrae (the spine bones) and spinal cord, and lastly, chronic back pain. Of course, every person and situation are different. And occasionally there are rare and serious kinds of back pain that do not fall into these 3 broad categories, but we will be talking about the common types that make up the vast majority of situations.

First 3 general remarks.

1 Back pain is an important message from your body, which is a true miracle of engineering, that you should not ignore. Take it seriously to avoid developing long-standing problems.

2 If you have a macho attitude about lifting very heavy things, please try to get rid of that attitude: I have seen too many men who are permanently disabled because they have attempted to lift extremely heavy objects without help or the proper tools. You are no less of a man if you take a short time out before lifting something heavy to consider your options in order to protect your back. When you do lift always use your legs and keep your back upright, holding the weight close to your body.

3 It is very important to understand that our habits of slouching in couches, soft arm chairs, soft mattresses, and sitting in the car (often the absolute WORST), year after year, and becoming overweight...all of these causes gradual deterioration in ways that lead to a breakdown in the structure of

your spine. By the time you start to have recurring episodes of low back pain, degenerative changes have often been developing for years. AGAIN: Take the message your body is sending you very seriously to learn about changing these habits, reconditioning yourself and turning the situation around before it is too late. More about this later.

1 So let's talk first about. Acute mechanical low back pain which involves the muscles that support the spine and usually occurs after an injury. It usually is off to the side, not right in the middle. It does not involve the nerves, so you won't feel pain going down the leg or into the buttocks. Most of the time if you have sprained a back muscle, you can tell. See if you can feel the area with your hand. Often getting off your feet, usually lying on your back on a carpeted floor or on some towels or an exercise mat with your knees bent up supported by pillows, and a pillow under your head will allow the muscles of the back to relax. Sometimes lying in this position and putting a tennis ball under the sore muscle will allow you to GENTLY massage it yourself. Don't mash too hard on the sprained muscle.

Moist heat also allows the muscle to relax. See if you can do some gentle twisting, rotating and bending to gently stretch the muscles involved...most of the time you can feel what needs to happen. If you can get a professional massage, that often helps this sort of injury. Likewise, acupuncture can help this kind of back pain and chiropractors can too. It's OK to take over the counter medicine like ibuprofen (ADVIL), or naproxen (ALEVE) for a few days. Most of the time mechanical low back pain does NOT require a trip to the ER, a doctor visit or x-rays and gets better fairly quickly. If the pain is very severe sometimes pain killers or muscle relaxants prescribed by your family doctor for a few days can help; or If more than a week has elapsed without improvement, then see your family doctor. If you get recurring episodes of mechanical low back pain, you need to learn about CONDITIONING, which I will discuss later.

2 Acute back pain affecting the discs, nerves, spinal bones and spinal cord is a little more serious. It can happen after what seems like a relatively minor movement like bending over to tie your shoe. This is because the conditions leading up to this have been slowly developing for a long time, and a minor movement is "the straw that broke the camel's (or YOUR) back!" Usually the pain is more severe, and it is right in the center at the bottom of the spine. Sometimes the pain will radiate to the groin, to the buttocks, or the leg. Even though the pain can be excruciating, it is not always necessary to go to the ER or the doctor right away, IF there is no weakness or numbness in the leg or

foot and you can manage the pain. Again, get in the position I described, and see if you can find a position of comfort. If you can find a position where there is no pain or minimal pain, stay that way as much as possible for a few days. It's a good idea to take ibuprofen 3 tablets 3-4 x a day, or naproxen, 2 tabs every 12 hours for a few days. When not in a position of comfort, walk in the most natural way possible. Usually for this sort of acute back pain, heat or ice or ointments don't do much good. Again, if you aren't making progress in a week or the pain is very severe, start with your family doctor. Try to avoid the ER if possible. If it seems to be getting better on its own, I still strongly advise that you go to a physical therapist and learn about a back conditioning program and start doing it.

Even though you can find loads of helpful exercises on YOUTUBE and the internet, nothing replaces one-to-one work with a good physical therapist who can determine exactly what YOU need. If you don't do this, you are likely to experience recurrences over the years, and sometimes each one is worse as the degenerative process that leads to these recurring bouts gets worse.

3 Which brings us to chronic low back pain. Unfortunately, millions of people suffer from this condition and chronic low back pain is the number one cause for missed work and disability all over the world. If your lower back has been hurting continuously for 3 months, then you are considered to be suffering from chronic low back pain. For chronic back pain you will need to be under the care of doctor. Almost certainly, the problem lies with some degree of degenerative disc disease. (Hold up model) The problem probably started a while ago with an injury to a disc. With time the disc slowly becomes more damaged. As this happens, the bones (the vertebrae, which are like building blocks) start to go out of alignment. The joints between the vertebrae, called the facet joints, rub against each other and can become INFLAMED and ARTHRITIC and sometimes lock, and the nerves can become irritated or pinched. As the spinal bones become arthritic, the holes where the nerve roots come out of the spinal cord become narrowed and sometimes the canal for the spinal cord itself becomes narrowed, which is called spinal stenosis. If you have numbness and tingling in your feet associated with your lower back problem that is a sign that you may have spinal stenosis.

Even the most skillful orthopedists, neurosurgeons and pain management specialists cannot always identify what structures exactly are causing chronic low back pain. MRI scans, which are usually done for anyone with chronic low

back pain who goes to a doctor, will often show a mix of problems. It is crucial that you work with a physical therapist to learn a home exercise and conditioning program. Please understand this VERY IMPORTANT POINT: THE POINT OF PHYSICAL THERAPY FOR ALL KINDS OF BACK PAIN IS NOT TO HAVE THE THERAPIST DO SOMETHING TO YOU, THOUGH THEY MAY BE ABLE TO GIVE SOME TEMPORARY RELIEF< BUT MUCH MORE IMPORTANTLY TO ANALYZE YOUR PARTICULAR BODY, YOUR ANATOMY AND DEVELOP A SPECIFIC PROGRAM FOR YOU TO DO AT HOME< TO RECONDITION YOUR BODY AND CORRECT THE PROBLEMS THAT HAVE LIKELY BEEN DEVELOPING FOR YEARS. If you take just ONE THING away from this video, this is it: IF YOU HAVE CHRONIC BACK PAIN you must be active in changing your habits. It might involve losing weight, eating differently, strengthening core muscles in the abdomen and pelvis that have been weak your entire life, and also learning how to deal with stress.

Little by little most chronic back pain can improve with this approach. Only a small fraction of people with chronic low back pain benefit from surgery. Avoid narcotics at all costs. If you get benefit from anti-inflammatories like ibuprofen and naproxen, (Advil and Aleve) be sure to do this under the supervision of your family doctor as these medications, while often helpful, can cause problems with long term use. If you haven't found a family doctor, spine specialist or physical therapist who can help you, especially by learning how to help yourself

KEEP LOOKING!!... and don't give up hope.

One final word, just as important if not MORE important than everything else I have said is something I mentioned a minute ago: if you have chronic back pain you must develop the right MENTAL ATTITUDE. You may have to deal with emotional and other stresses. If you are tense inside, your body will hold tension. Again, this is something you must find the right health professional to help with you, but it is a crucial point. Chronic pain cannot be successfully managed without this often-missing factor. Even though learning how to relax and how to deal with stress and tension will not by itself solve the problem, it has been proven over and over again to be extremely helpful in relieving the suffering that accompanies chronic lower back problems.

Thank you and good luck!

