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The RX for Back Pain

"Ouch! My aching back!" If it's not an expression you've used before, it may be one that you'll use in the future. Back pain is prevalent among people, young and old, active and inactive, male and female. Almost everyone has low back pain at one time or another. The good news is that most low back pain will go away in a few weeks with some basic self-care. But if your pain is severe or lasts more than a couple of weeks, see your doctor.

What is low back pain?

Low back pain can affect the back anywhere below the ribs and above the legs. The lower back is the connection between the upper and lower body, and it bears most of the body's weight. Because of these roles, it is easily injured when you lift, reach, or twist.

What causes low back pain?

Low back pain is often caused by overuse, strain, or injury. For instance, people often hurt their backs playing sports or working in the yard, being jolted in a car accident, or lifting something too heavy.

Aging plays a part too. Your bones and muscles tend to lose strength as you age, which increases your risk of injury. The spongy discs between the bones of the spine (vertebrae) may suffer from wear and tear and no longer provide enough cushion between the bones. A disc that bulges or breaks open (herniated disc) can press on nerves, causing back pain.

In some people, low back pain is the result of arthritis, broken vertebrae (compression fractures) caused by bone loss (osteoporosis), illness, or a spine problem you were born with.

Often doctors don't really know what causes low back pain. But it is more likely to become long-lasting (chronic) if you are under stress or depressed.

How is it treated?

The old RX of icing and immobilizing your aching back is outdated. The American College of Physicians has released new guidelines for treatment of back pain. Check-out these five steps for getting your ailing back up to par in no time.

Step #1: Apply Heat - Soak in a hot bath, snuggle into a warm spa, or place a heating pad on your area of pain. The warmth will loosen strained muscles.

Step #2: Keep Mobile - It's tempting to camp-out in bed with a TV remote when back pain hits. But, that's actually the worst thing you can do! Staying in bed for more than 1 or 2 days can weaken your muscles and make the problem worse. Keeping mobile is the key to a quick recovery. Of course, nobody is suggesting that you jump full-throttle into triathlon training. Just keep up your regular life activities because setting up permanent camp on the sofa can actually increase your muscle stiffness.

Step #3: Examine Your Walk - Take a good look at your gait. Do you shuffle from place to place? The shuffle step increases stiffness in your back. Try taking longer, slower steps.

Step #4: Exercise Patience - For most people, time is the great healer, and pain will subside shortly after the onset of back pain. If your pain lasts more than a few weeks, consider seeing an orthopedist or pain specialist, who can diagnose your specific back condition.

Step #5: Strengthen Your Core - Focus on exercise activities that strengthen your core to ward-off back injuries. Look for exercises that keep a fluid range of motion going in your hips as well.

Walking is the simplest and maybe the best exercise for the lower back. It gets your blood moving and helps your muscles stay strong. Start with easy walks of 5 to 10 minutes a day, and gradually increase your time. Walking in water up to your waist or chest is also good exercise.

How can you prevent low back pain from returning?

Once you have had low back pain, you are likely to have it again. To help keep your back healthy and avoid further pain:

- Practice good posture when you sit, stand, and walk.
- Get regular, low-impact exercise. Walk, swim, or ride a stationary bike. Stretch before you exercise.
- Wear low-heeled shoes with good support.
- Sleep on your side. A medium-firm mattress may be easiest on your back.
- Watch your weight. Being too heavy, especially around your waist, puts extra stress on your back.
- Don't try to lift things that are too heavy for you. When you must lift, bend your knees and keep your back straight, keep the object you are lifting close to your belly button, and avoid lifting and twisting at the same time. If you sit or stand for long periods at work:
 - Pay attention to your posture. Sit or stand up straight, with your shoulders back.
 - Make sure your chair has good back support.
 - Take regular breaks to walk around.

If your work involves a lot of bending, reaching, or lifting:

- Talk to your human resources department to see if there are other ways you can do your work.
- Don't depend on a "back belt" to protect your back. Studies have not shown these belts to be effective in reducing back injuries. The most they can do is to help remind you to use good techniques for lifting.

Think posture. Take care of your back!