

Back or neck pain



At some point, most of us will suffer from back or neck pain, whether it's caused by something as small as sleeping in a strange position or something more serious like an accident or injury. And with 63% of Americans now overweight or obese,¹ back pain is on the rise due to the strain carrying excess weight places on the body.¹ According to the American Chiropractic Association, back pain is one of the most common reasons people visit a doctor or miss work,² and more health care dollars are spent on back and neck pain than on almost any other condition.³

Prevention

Fortunately, there are things you can do to reduce the amount and severity of pain you experience. Regular exercise that increases muscle strength and balance, as well as practicing good posture, will help. Eating a healthy diet with plenty of calcium and vitamin D will strengthen your spine, helping to prevent osteoporosis. You can also protect your back by avoiding heavy lifting, using proper techniques when you do have to lift heavy objects and maintaining a healthy body weight.⁴

Common causes

Your pain is a symptom of an underlying medical condition, and only your doctor can diagnose you. Common causes of back and neck pain include:⁴

Mechanical problems

Intervertebral disk degeneration – a common age-related problem – results in the disks between the vertebrae breaking down and losing their cushioning ability. Muscle spasms, tension and ruptured or herniated disks are also mechanical problems.

Injuries

Sprains and fractures can cause short-term or chronic pain. Sprains are tears in the ligaments supporting the spine and can happen when you twist or lift improperly. Fractures can be caused by osteoporosis or from falls or other accidents.

Acquired conditions and diseases

Scoliosis, arthritis, pregnancy, kidney stones or infections, endometriosis, osteoporosis and fibromyalgia can all cause back pain. Spinal stenosis, a narrowing of the spinal column, puts pressure on the spinal cord and nerves.

Infections and tumors

Although it is rare, an infection or tumor could cause back or neck pain. An infection involving the vertebrae or the disks that cushion the vertebrae, a condition called osteomyelitis, could be to blame.

Treatment

Usually back pain resolves on its own, with or without treatment. See a doctor if you have numbness or tingling; if your pain is severe and doesn't improve with medication and rest; if your pain has started after a fall or injury; or if you have pain as well as trouble urinating; weakness, pain or numbness in your legs; fever; or weight loss.⁴

DID YOU KNOW?

Smoking cigarettes increases your risk of developing lower back pain. By constricting the arteries, it diminishes your body's ability to deliver blood to the disks in your spinal column. Smoking increases your risk of osteoporosis and slows healing. Also, coughing caused by heavy smoking can cause pain in the lower back. Bottom line? It's in your best interest to stop smoking today!⁴

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is caused by low bone mass – a common age-related problem for men and women. Reduced bone mass causes deterioration of the bone structure, frequently resulting in fractures to the spine, hips and wrists, even without major trauma. Reduce your risk by eating a healthy diet high in calcium and vitamin D. Perform weight-bearing and other strength-training exercises. Avoid alcohol, caffeine and tobacco. If you already have osteoporosis, there are many medications available for preventing or slowing further bone loss.⁵

Resources

For more information, visit MyHealth@BCBSGA via bcbsga.com, and look up the Back & Neck Condition Center. You'll find the latest news about back or neck pain, as well as links to tools that can help you learn more.

You can also visit spine-health.com for message boards, e-newsletters, lists of clinical trials and tools to help you manage your pain.

Visit bcbsga.com for more ways to get healthy – and stay healthy.



Sources: (1) WebMD, *Percentage of Overweight, Obese Americans Swells* (February 10, 2010); webmd.com (2) American Chiropractic Association, *Back Pain Facts and Statistics* (accessed March 30, 2010); acatoday.org (3) WebMD, *\$86 Billion Spent on Back, Neck Pain* (February 12, 2008); webmd.com (4) National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, *Handout on Health: Back Pain* (July 2009); niams.nih.gov (5) International Osteoporosis Foundation, *Facts and statistics about osteoporosis and its impact* (accessed March 31, 2010); iofbonehealth.org

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