



EMERGENCY

DEPARTMENT

ACUTE LOW BACK PAIN – STRAIN

The doctor has assessed your back pain as being due to either “mechanical” reasons (muscle and ligament injury) or due to a bulging intervertebral disc which is pinching a nerve. Over 90% of people with either of these conditions recover fully by 6 – 8 weeks after onset. Less than 10% of people go on to have chronic back pain after this time. In fact, most people feel a lot better within 1 – 3 weeks. The initial treatment for both types of pain is identical. To have the best chance for a rapid and complete recovery follow these simple rules:

REST: For severe pain the first 24 – 48 hours should be spent lying on your back on a firm mattress or on the floor. You should only get up to eat and go to the bathroom. Try one of the following positions for comfort:

- 1) Lying flat on your back in bed with 2 or 3 pillows under the knees.
- 2) Lying on your side with hips and knees bent, with 1 or 2 pillows between your knees. A small towel rolled up under your side at waist level may also help.
- 3) Lying on a carpeted floor flat on your back, with your legs and feet up on a chair or couch.
- 4) Lying on your stomach with no pillows.



ICE: For the first 1 – 2 days apply an ice pack or bag of frozen vegetables wrapped in a damp towel to the painful areas every 2 – 3 hours for **no longer than 10 – 15 minutes at a time**. If this fails to relieve the pain try heat immediately after, or instead of the ice. After 48 hours, switch to heat.

HEAT: Moist heat usually works better than dry heat. Put a moist towel against the skin of your back with a number of layers of dry towels over top. Put a hot water bottle on top of this or soak in a hot bathtub or whirlpool for 15 – 20 minutes at a time, every 2 – 3 hours during the first 2 days. After the first 2 days, use heat once or twice per day especially before performing stretching exercises.

MEDICATION: The doctor may have prescribed a muscle relaxant, pain killer or anti-inflammatory medication to try and give you some relief from your pain. You may experience temporary drowsiness as a result. If this occurs, avoid activities requiring you to be alert, such as driving a car. Avoid alcohol while taking this type of medication. Codeine products may upset your stomach and constipate you. You can relieve this by taking them after meals and by eating extra bran cereal, bran muffins, prunes, or by using a bulk laxative such as Metamucil. If no medication was prescribed, you may use acetaminophen (Tylenol) in a dose of 2 regular or extra strength tablets, taken every 4 hours. To avoid constipation, drink 8 – 8oz glasses of water daily.

POSTURE: As the pain decreases you should begin moving as much as you can. Try to maintain a straight back when getting up from a bed or when sitting or standing up for a long time. When sitting, use a firm chair with your back held fairly straight and a small stool for your feet. A small cushion or rolled towel in the small of your back or an Obus form may also help. When standing for long periods put one foot at a time on a small stool or bench to relieve strain on your back muscles. Change positions frequently.



ACTIVITY: Avoid lifting or repetitive bending in the first 2 – 3 days. During the first 48 hours you should try to do some slow, gentle stretching while lying down i.e. pelvic tilts, curls or extension stretches. Stop if you experience a lot of pain. To get into bed sit on the edge, lower yourself sideways with your arms while you lift your feet up at the same time onto the bed. Then roll your shoulders and hips at the same time onto your back. To get out of bed turn on your side facing the side of the bed. Bend your knees up, then push yourself up sideways with your elbow to a sitting position.



SEE A DOCTOR URGENTLY IF:

- 1) the pain continues to get worse in spite of rest.
- 2) you begin to feel the onset of weakness, numbness or tingling in your legs or feet.
- 3) you lose control of your bowels or bladder.
- 4) you develop numbness in the sitting part of your buttocks (saddle anesthesia)
- 5) you develop any other new symptoms such as fever, urinary difficulty, bloody urine, unusual vaginal discharge or bleeding, or stomach pains.