



Exercising with lower back pain

Every move counts

Move more and reduce your sedentary time each day by incorporating different types of movement. It is never too late to start, some is always better than none!

How to get started

Undertaking regular exercise when you have lower back pain can help speed recovery, reduce pain, improve mobility and strengthen core and back muscles to prevent re-injury. An effective exercise plan can help you improve your overall fitness, increase muscle strength, improve balance, increase flexibility and coordination while reducing stress and risk of re-injury to the lower back. This means that you can enjoy returning to activities of daily living and leisure time with friends and family. Regular exercise also significantly reduce the risk of developing obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, some cancers, mental health conditions and osteoporosis, which may be a problem if you have been inactive for any length of time.

Discuss with your doctor or healthcare provider how you can start to exercise or how you can modify an exercise plan to suit your specific needs, especially if you have had hip or back surgery. Regular exercise and time may well negate the need for more medicines and treatments.

Take all medicines as recommended by your doctor or pharmacist.

Warm up and cool down

Always start your exercise session with a 10–15-minute warm up to loosen up the muscles and raise the heart rate safely. Warm-up exercises include dynamic stretches, range-of-motion activities and low intensity movements. This can be done standing up, walking around, marching on the spot or seated.

Always end your exercise session with a 10–15-minute cool-down to ensure your heart rate and breathing rate return to normal safely. Cool down exercises include slowly decreasing the intensity of your activity and simple stretches.

Be active

Some is good, more is better

How much:	Aim for at least 150 – 300 minutes a week of moderate intensity or at least 75–150 minutes a week of vigorous intensity physical activity. Start moving more each day increasing to regular movement every day and add sessions as your strength and stamina improve.
How hard:	Any movement helps. Aim for low to moderate intensity— aim to get slightly breathless. Take frequent breaks, if necessary. Stop exercising if you start to feel unwell or experience angina or chest pain.
How long:	Aim to spread out your sessions throughout the week. If your fitness level is low, start with 5–10-minute sessions and add 10-minute intervals until you can comfortably exercise for longer.

What type:	All physical activity counts. Try low-impact exercises within your abilities: walking, swimming, aqua aerobics and cycling—choose something you enjoy! Recreational team sports such as tennis, or volleyball are great social activities too! Household activities such as cleaning, gardening, vacuuming or walking your dog are great activities for your health.
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What will it do for me?

Regular exercise results in fewer episodes of lower back pain and less pain when an episode does occur. You are also more likely to stay functional (e.g. continue working and carry on with recreational activities). You may also find it easier to control or lose weight, decreasing the stress placed on the back and joints.

Build strength

How much:	At least twice a week. Once the acute pain subsides incorporate light abdominal, back and leg muscle strength exercises to improve walking and balance.
How hard:	Start with light muscle strengthening exercises and progress to moderate or greater intensities over time.
How long:	Choose 8–10 exercises targeting the upper and lower body and repeat each exercise 10–15 times. Try 1–3 sets of each exercise.
What type:	Choose strength exercises or follow a specific lower back exercise plan to strengthen the muscles that support the back and core. Try weight or resistance training using light weights, resistance bands or household items. Strength exercises such as wall press-ups, side and front arm raises, arm curls, side and back leg raises, chair dips and knee curls require little or no equipment.

What will it do for me?

Back strength exercises not only help avoid and minimise the severity of injury if the spine is traumatised, they also help relieve pain. Strong 'core' muscles can provide back pain relief because they provide support for the spine and facilitate movements that extend or twist the spine.

Improve balance

How much:	At least three days a week.
How hard:	Try 2–3 balance exercises and repeat each exercise 10–15 times.
How long:	Hold each balance for 10–30 seconds.
What type:	Try yoga, Tai Chi or home balance exercises. Always exercise safely when doing balance exercises. If you are at high risk of falling, do seated balance exercises or exercise using a sturdy chair or wall for support.

What will it do for me?

Practising balance exercises helps to train your body to react more quickly to a loss of balance and can help reduce the risk of falls, fractures and injuries.



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Sedentary living

Reduce the amount of time being sedentary. Move more and break up sedentary time. Sedentary behavior is defined as time spent sitting or lying with low energy expenditure, while awake in the context of occupational, educational, home and community settings, and travel. Higher amounts of sedentary behavior can increase the risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.

Replace sedentary behavior with more physical activity of any intensity (including light intensity). It is possible to avoid sedentary behaviour and be physically active while sitting or lying, through, for example, upper body led activities, inclusive and/or wheelchair-specific sport and activities. Try seated stretches for those with limited mobility; using active forms of transport; standing while working (within your abilities and environment), and other accessible active options to replace sedentary time.

Your exercise, your way!

Choose activities that are easy to start with, and that you enjoy. Always exercise within your abilities. If mobility is difficult, adapted cycling, swimming and chair-based exercises may be better alternatives. Exercise with friends and family or join a group class to improve your motivation levels and engage in social activities. Try exercising both indoors and outdoors and see which you prefer! Most importantly: **some physical activity is better than none.**

Exercise safety

Discuss with your doctor when you should progress to more intense activities. Never exercise to the point of pain: if something hurts don't do it!

If physical activity persistently exacerbates your pain, discuss with your physician or healthcare provider to determine if further investigation, medication, treatment, or consultation is required.

Start with shorter sessions (e.g. 10–15 minutes) and slowly build up to the recommended level.

Avoid strength training if you have significant aortic valve stenosis or pulmonary valve stenosis.

Aim to get slightly out of breath, but exercise sensibly and stop the activity if you feel unwell.

Always wear comfortable clothing and shoes that give good support. Take frequent breaks if necessary, and drink water before, during and after exercise.

Choose environments that you can access freely and safely. Please ask your healthcare provider or local leisure organizations for advice on the best option for you.

Resources

Pain Canada provides online resources and programming across the country for individuals living with chronic pain. <https://www.paincanada.ca/resources/resources-for-people-with-pain>.



Scan for more
physical activity
resources!

