

Muscle matters: Protect yourself from low back pain

Although other forms of pain can be more severe, nothing rivals the broad impact of low back pain, the leading cause of disability in the world. Men and women, labourers and office workers alike on every continent are affected.^{38,39}

Fortunately, low back pain can usually be prevented or treated effectively. You have the power to protect yourself.

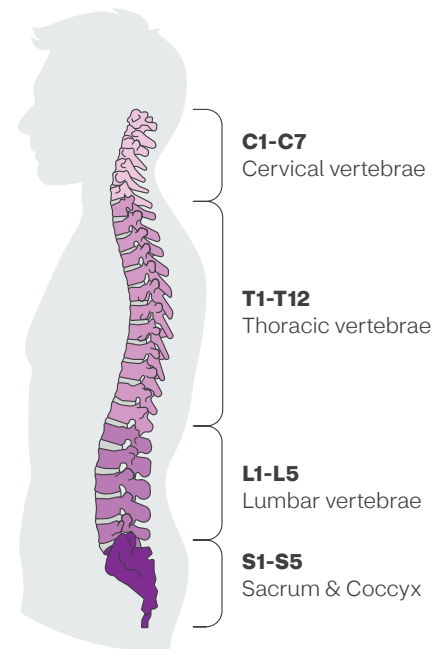
Defining back pain⁴⁰

Low back pain affects the five vertebrae in the lumbar region, the discs that cushion them and the associated ligaments, tendons and nerves. Most low back pain is mechanical, meaning the components aren't fitting together and moving properly.

Acute back pain occurs suddenly and usually goes away after a few days or weeks of self-care. Chronic pain lasts three months or longer, even after the underlying problem has been resolved.

Sources of low back pain⁴¹

Although most low back pain is mechanical in nature, the causes vary widely.



Congenital: Birth defects can lead to conditions like scoliosis (sideways curvature of the spine) and spina bifida (malformation of the spine).⁴²

Injury: Injuries can cause everything from sprains (overstretched or torn ligaments) and strains (tendon or muscle tears) to fractures and herniated discs.

Non-spine issues: Other issues include pain caused by kidney stones, tumours, fibromyalgia and pregnancy.

Degenerative problems: Problems include rheumatoid arthritis, spondylosis (general degeneration of the spine) and spondylitis (inflammation of the vertebrae).

Spinal cord and nerve problems: A range of problems can affect the spinal cord and nerves, including sciatica (pain caused by pressure on the sciatic nerve), spinal stenosis (a narrowing of the spinal column) and osteoporosis (a gradual decrease in bone density and strength).

38 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)30480-X/fulltext#seccetitle20](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)30480-X/fulltext#seccetitle20)

39 <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2685622>

40 <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/Patient-Caregiver-Education/Fact-Sheets/Low-Back-Pain-Fact-Sheet>

41 <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/Patient-Caregiver-Education/Fact-Sheets/Low-Back-Pain-Fact-Sheet>

42 <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/scoliosis/symptoms-causes/syc-20350716#:~:text=Scoliosis%20is%20a%20sideways%20curvature,of%20most%20scoliosis%20is%20unknown.>

Back pain risk factors^{43,44,45,46}

Two important risk factors—age and genetics—are beyond your control. However, you can address most risk factors through lifestyle changes.

Problem	Solution
Fitness: A strong body and a strong back go hand in hand. But how you exercise is important. You can cause damage if you sit at a desk all day but then overexert yourself at the weekend.	Establish a regular routine of low-impact exercise, including activities like walking, bicycling, yoga and Pilates.
Obesity: Excess body weight shifts your centre of gravity, forces the back muscles to work harder and can aggravate conditions like osteoarthritis and herniated disc.	Work to reduce your body mass index through a combination of diet and exercise.
Job-related factors: Occupational risk factors account for more than a third of low back pain globally. Tasks that require heavy lifting, twisting the spine and repetitive motion can lead to back pain, but so too can working in a non-ergonomic office environment.	Learn to handle heavy weights safely. Avoid repetitive motion. Set up an ergonomic workspace.
Smoking: Smokers are almost three times as likely to suffer low back pain. Smoking accelerates disc degeneration, contributes to osteoporosis and slows down healing.	Talk with your doctor about how to quit.
Mental health: Stress, depression and anxiety can cause muscle tension. They may also heighten your perception of your pain.	Talk with your doctor or a counsellor about ways to treat your mental health condition.

You don't have to be a bodybuilder for your muscles to matter. Healthy muscles help prevent or minimise a wide range of physical and mental health conditions. At our Musculoskeletal health resources hub, you can find the flyers and articles offering easy-to-action lifestyle changes to help you build muscle strength and prevent and manage musculoskeletal problems, including low back pain.

Also, Aetna International members can access the Health Hub—register if you haven't already—to quickly find

self-help tools, professional services, member offers, and to submit and track claims and more. Within the Health Hub, you can learn more about the Kaia app, which provides curated, customised guidance from pain-treatment experts, and ClassPass, which offers virtual fitness classes.

For more information about your health care benefits, contact your plan sponsor or one of Aetna International's expert sales consultants for group business or individuals and families.

Straighten up. Stretch out. Stay strong.

Musculoskeletal support resources:

<https://www.aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/musculoskeletal-health-support-resource.html>

Health Hub: <https://www.aetnainternational.com/members/login.do>

43 <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/Patient-Caregiver-Education/Fact-Sheets/Low-Back-Pain-Fact-Sheet>
44 <https://www.aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/health-care/prevent-manage-conditions/low-back-pain-on-rise.html>

45 <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/why-smoking-will-worsen-your-chronic-pain/>
46 <https://www.everydayhealth.com/back-pain/7-bad-habits-that-cause-back-pain.aspx>