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NATIONAL CLINICAL GUIDELINES FOR QATAR

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS & CAREGIVERS

What You Need to Know About Low Back Pain

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WHAT IS LOW BACK PAIN?

Low back pain (LBP) refers to pain that you feel in your lower back, that may also extend into the buttocks or thighs. It can be tension, soreness, or stiffness in your lower back.

It is a common problem, which affects about 80% of people at some point in their lives. It is often caused by a muscle or ligament strain and not usually by a serious problem.

In most people, LBP starts quickly and then reduces after a few days or weeks. This is called **Acute low back pain**. In some people the pain may last for several months or even years, this is called **Chronic low back pain**.

Low back pain can affect both women and men. It can occur in the young, middle-aged, or older people.

The key symptoms in most people are:

- Pain in the lower back which may be:
 - Sudden or slowly developing.
 - Deep ache, sharp, burning, or needle-like in nature.
 - Constant or recurring.
- Decreased movement of the lower back.

Other additional symptoms that may be present include:

- Pain radiating to the leg.
- Stiffness in the back.
- Difficulty changing positions.
- Difficulty ascending or descending the stairs.
- Pain on walking.
- Muscle spasms, cramps, or weakness in the lower back, pelvis, or legs.

Most cases of low back pain are not due to a serious problem and pain-relief medicines will usually help. However, if you have severe pain that is getting worse, then you should see a doctor immediately.

IMPORTANT TIP:

You should stay as active as possible because resting for long periods can delay healing and make the pain worse.

WHAT CAUSES LOW BACK PAIN?

In most cases the cause of low back pain is unclear, but several factors can increase the risk of developing LBP. These include:

- **Older age.**
- **Gender.** Women are more prone to develop LBP than men.
- **Family history**
- **Obesity.** Obese people are at high risk of developing LBP.
- **Occupation.** Certain jobs that require prolonged sitting or standing, heavy lifting or lifting with poor technique, forceful movements, or exposure to vibration.
- **Injuries.** Repetitive joint injury or trauma to the back.
- **Smoking.**
- **Pregnancy.**
- **Medical problems**, such as inflammation of the joints.
- **Emotional problems** such as feeling stressed or depressed.

WHEN SHOULD I SEE A DOCTOR?

You should see a doctor if your symptoms:

- **Persist for longer than a few weeks or are getting worse.**
- **Significantly affect your everyday activities.**

Seek medical care immediately if you have any of the following symptoms:

- **Difficulty in passing urine.**
- **Loss of bladder or bowel control.**
- **Numbness around the genital or back passage.**
- **Loss of feeling, numbness, or altered sensation in both legs.**
- **Unexplained weight loss, night sweats, fever, or feeling unwell.**

WHAT YOUR DOCTOR WILL DO?

Your doctor will ask specific questions and perform a physical examination. If your LBP does not suggest a serious underlying cause, you are not likely to need imaging tests.

If your symptoms and signs suggest an underlying cause, your doctor may order some tests such as imaging scan and blood tests to confirm the diagnosis or may refer you to a specialist for further treatment.

In most people suffering from LBP, it is not possible to identify the exact cause. Doctors refer to this type of LBP as **non-specific low back pain**.

Your doctor will discuss the different treatment options and develop an appropriate treatment plan.



Low back pain is a major cause of worry, disability, and time off work. About 60% of people in Qatar, are living with low back pain.

HOW IS LOW BACK PAIN TREATED?

The most helpful treatments for many people with LBP are:

- Staying active.
- Exercising.
- Making lifestyle changes.
- Taking pain-relief medicines.

However, some people will need additional medical treatment which may include one or more of the following:

- **Physiotherapy.** Your doctor may refer you to a physiotherapist who will teach you specific exercises to help with your pain.
- **Manual therapies.** Your physiotherapist will use manipulation and mobilisation techniques of the joints in your back to help reduce back pain along with exercise.
- **Medicines.** If the standard pain-relief medicines like analgesics and anti-inflammatory pills are not providing adequate pain control, your doctor may suggest some additional treatments.
- **Injections.** Injections may be used for very severe back pain or if the usual treatments like physiotherapy and pain-relief medicines are not working well enough. These injections are usually steroid medicines and may be placed into the joints of the back.
- **Surgery.** This is usually reserved for people with severe LBP that does not respond to treatments. Urgent surgery may be needed if you lose bladder or bowel control, or unable to use of your legs, but this is extremely rare.



THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOURSELF GET BETTER

- **Regular exercise.** At least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity and 2 days of muscle strengthening activities, every week will help to build up your muscle strength, and stay fit and healthy.
- **Continue your normal physical activities.** Avoid bed rest. Staying as active as possible, will help you to get better more quickly.
- **Avoid sustained postures and repetitive movement patterns.**
- **Lift loads correctly.** Lift things close to your body and bend your knees instead of your back. Avoid lifting heavy loads.
- **Take your pain-relief medicines** as prescribed. You can use painkillers for a short period. See your doctor if there is no improvement in your condition after this time.
- **Revise your lifestyle.** Consider modifying your diet, engaging in regular enjoyable exercise, adopting stress-management techniques, workspace, sleep pattern and avoiding prolonged repetitive postures to help you reduce the strain on your back.
- **Other measures.** Applying heat can help to relieve pain and stiffness. However, you should protect your skin from direct contact with the heat to avoid burns or irritation.

FOLLOW-UP

You should attend your follow-up appointments regularly to ensure that your symptoms and medicines are properly monitored by the doctor.

Ask your doctor about the side effects of the medicines prescribed to you and whether there are any activities you need to avoid.

If you have undergone surgery for an underlying cause of LBP, you may need to see your doctor after surgery. Ask your doctor about when you can resume normal activities after surgery.



TOP-TIP:

Some pain-relief medicines can damage the kidneys when taken for a very long time. Ask your pharmacist or doctor about the safety and appropriate duration of the medications you are prescribed.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Additional information on low back pain can be found in the National Clinical Guideline published by The Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) Qatar.

The Guideline is available to the public from the MOPH website:
www.moph.gov.qa