

Managing low back pain: treatment options



With one in four Australians experiencing low back pain¹, back surgery may not be the only or best option.

The effectiveness of non-invasive treatments

In 2016, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) in the United States reviewed the effectiveness of non-invasive treatments for low back pain. They looked at pharmaceutical treatments, psychological treatments, and physical treatments. They found that after more serious causes of back pain, such as a tumour or traumatic injury, have been ruled out, non-invasive treatments for low back pain should be implemented before surgery.² In fact, evidence is growing that non-invasive treatment options can be a better alternative to potentially risky surgery, with potentially better outcomes.²

Here is a list of non-invasive therapies you may want to consider before surgery.

Keep moving

Lying down if you have back pain may actually make things worse. It is usually considered better to walk than to stay in bed. Unless

specifically advised against by your doctor, try to walk for 10 to 20 minutes at a time every 2 to 3 hours.³ Be sure to walk on level surfaces, not on hills or stairs.³ Walk quickly if you can, and swing your arms as you walk.³ If you have to sit, it's recommended to change positions every 30 minutes and take breaks.²

Ice and heat

There is no rule about using heat or ice for your back pain. You can try each to see which works best for you to help relieve your pain.

Pain medicine

For most low back pain, you can take over-the-counter pain medicine such as acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol) or ibuprofen (e.g. Advil or Motrin) or naproxen (e.g. Aleve).³ If your doctor prescribes a muscle relaxant for severe pain, carefully follow the instructions for taking this medication.

Additional alternatives to consider before surgery

Many types of healthcare providers offer back pain treatment options. These treatments are sometimes considered part of alternative or complementary medicine, because they are often viewed as ‘outside’ mainstream medical therapies. Some therapies are based on ancient healing techniques, while others are based on more modern approaches to rehabilitation and pain management. Many people find relief from these alternative therapies, and some studies have shown that patients opting for alternative therapies can have the same outcomes as those with surgical interventions, but without the inherent risk and expense of surgery.³

Physical therapy

Physical therapy (also known as physiotherapy) uses exercises and equipment to reduce or eliminate pain and rehabilitate the spine.⁴

Manual manipulation

Physical therapists use manual manipulation or ‘manual therapy’ to apply pressure on muscle tissue and manipulate joints in an attempt to decrease back pain caused by muscle spasm, muscle tension, and joint dysfunction.⁵

Mobilisation

Mobilisation uses slow, measured movements to twist, pull, or push your bones and joints into position to help restore flexibility and range of motion.⁴

Therapeutic massage

Massage therapy improves blood flow, releases tense muscles and decreases overall stiffness in your soft tissues.⁶

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a traditional Chinese medicine technique that uses very fine metal needles inserted into the body at specific points to stimulate the body’s natural healing.⁷

It may take time to find an alternative therapy that works for you. Start with your healthcare provider for advice on what alternative medical approaches to consider, and where to start looking for a qualified practitioner in your area.

If you do not respond to nonsurgical therapies after 6 weeks, your healthcare provider may recommend local anesthetic such as a corticosteroid injection to help relieve pressure on nerves and nerve roots in your back.⁸ However, it’s important to note research has not shown that local injections are effective in controlling acute or chronic low back pain that does not spread down the leg.⁹ As with any injection, it’s important to talk to your doctor about your back care options.

It is very important to consult your doctor before beginning any of the above therapy programs. You want to make sure that the therapy you choose is appropriate for your back problem. You also want to be sure that your doctor first rule out any underlying conditions that may be causing your back pain. Lastly, if you don’t find relief from any of these lifestyle changes and therapies, you and your doctor may want to discuss surgical alternatives.

1. NPS Medicinewise, nps.org.au, “10 things you need to know about low back pain,” October 2018
2. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, “Effective Health Care Program: Noninvasive Treatments for Low Back Pain,” February 2016
3. Annals Internal Medicine, “Diagnosis and Treatment of Low Back Pain: A Joint Clinical Practice Guideline from the American College of Physicians and the American Pain Society,” October 2007
4. Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care, “Exercise and physiotherapy for chronic low back pain,” December 2015
5. Spine Journal, “Evidence-informed management of chronic low back pain with spinal manipulation and mobilization,” January 2008
6. Annals of Internal Medicine, “A review of the evidence for the effectiveness, safety, and cost of acupuncture, massage therapy, and spinal manipulation for back pain,” June 2003
7. National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, “Acupuncture: In Depth,” January 2016
8. Kelley’s Textbook of Rheumatology, “Low back pain,” 2009
9. Kelley’s Textbook of Rheumatology, “Differential Diagnosis of Regional Musculoskeletal Pain: Low Back Pain,” 2009

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