



Common Sense About the Common Backache

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If you have a *back*, you've probably had a *backache*. I mean the ordinary "I threw my back out" kind. In fact, 70 percent of us will experience backache in the coming year.

I want to chip in my "two cents worth" of common sense about this common problem. In fact, I'll give you at least a dime's worth—two cents at a time. But once again, I'm only talking about the ordinary sore back with its typical stiffness and grabbing, achy pain. If your problem includes any "**red flags**" that I have listed at the end of this column, see your doctor promptly. But for the rest of you, and that's most of us, take these things to heart:

1. In the short term, your back will hurt. But in the long term, it will turn out fine. Most back pain has no serious cause and leaves the spine undamaged.
2. Your pain will almost certainly improve in a few days to a few weeks. Meanwhile, stay as active as you are able. If you can't do your normal work, talk with your supervisor about temporary changes to help you through the day. Soon you will handle everything normally again. Try normal activities more slowly and carefully. If something hurts too much today, then try again tomorrow.
3. Exercise, almost any kind, helps. Avoiding activity does more harm than good! Take a walk two or more times a day. If today you can only go 10 minutes each time, then tomorrow try 15, and the next day 20, and so on.
4. You will have good days and bad days. On bad days, be ready with ice, heat, over-the-counter medicine—whatever takes the edge off the pain. And, the simpler the medication the better, like acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Prescription pain medications, while occasionally helpful, run the risk of prolonging the problem by delaying return to normal activity.
5. Even back pain that has no serious cause may return time to time. In fact, it usually does. You can minimize these recurrences by staying fit with healthy, balanced exercise habits that include stretching, strengthening, and cardio. A healthy lifestyle can keep back pain away.

Spines are designed to move. When yours gives you trouble, remember that the sooner you get mobile and active again, the sooner your normal life returns. So fight back! Don't take back pain lying down!

RED FLAGS

See your doctor promptly to get specific advice about your back pain if any of these things apply:

- **You are older than 50 or less than 20**
- **Your pain followed forceful trauma such as a car accident or fall from a height**
- **Your pain followed a minor accident or exertion AND you may have weak bones (osteoporosis)**
- **Your back pain causes one or both legs to feel numb, painful, or tingly past knee level ("sciatica"); especially if you have leg muscle weakness**

- **You feel numbness in the groin, or have bladder trouble such as difficulty starting urinary stream or difficulty holding urine**
- **You recently had an infection such as bladder or kidney infection**
- **You presently:**
 - **Feel ill such as with fever, chills, or unexpected weight loss OR**
 - **Awaken from a sound sleep because of back pain**
- **You ever had:**
 - **Any type of cancer OR**
 - **Used IV street drugs OR**
 - **Suppression of your immune system such as from steroids, transplant anti-rejection medications, or positive HIV/AIDS status**
- **Your pain doesn't improve in two or three weeks**

If none of these apply, you may safely follow the Common Sense tips above for up to the first three to four weeks of a back pain episode.