

Easing Lower Back Pain: Expert Advice

Lower back pain is one of the most common—and frustrating—health complaints, affecting people of all ages and lifestyles. Whether it's the result of poor posture, muscle strain, or simply the wear and tear of everyday life, this type of discomfort can interfere with everything from work productivity to quality sleep.



Benjamin Berthet, DO
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Fortunately, there are practical, evidence-based strategies that can help relieve lower back pain and prevent it from recurring. Here, Benjamin Berthet, DO, who practices pediatrics and internal medicine with Salinas Valley Health, shares some of the most effective ways to ease lower back pain and support long-term spinal health.

Two Categories of Lower Back Pain

Lower back pain is one of the most common reasons people visit a doctor, with more than 80% of individuals experiencing it at some point in their lives. At any given time, nearly half the population reports dealing with some level of back discomfort.

When diagnosing low back pain, healthcare providers, such as Dr. Berthet, typically group it into two broad categories. The most common—and least dangerous—category involves soft tissue issues, such as strained or tight muscles and ligaments. This type can be acute, lasting a few days, or chronic, persisting for years. Fortunately, about 85% of lower back pain cases fall into this category and often resolve on their own within a few weeks, although certain treatments can accelerate recovery.

The second, less common—but more serious—category of lower back pain involves issues beyond muscle strain. These can include problems with the bones near the spinal cord that may fracture or shift, potentially compressing nerves and causing lasting damage. In more severe cases, back pain can result from infections, autoimmune diseases, cancers, or referred pain from internal organs, such as the kidneys, pancreas, or colon. These conditions may require hospitalization and urgent medical treatment.

“That is why I definitely recommend people be seen by a healthcare professional and have someone check out their back pain to see exactly what is going on,” states Dr. Berthet.

Who Is Most at Risk for Lower Back Pain?

Several factors can increase a person's risk of developing lower back pain. These include smoking, being overweight or obese, and engaging in physically demanding work that involves heavy lifting or repetitive bending. On the flip side, a sedentary lifestyle—such as sitting for long periods at a desk—can also contribute to back pain. Additionally, mental health challenges like anxiety, depression, or high-stress work environments can raise the likelihood of experiencing lower back pain.

“Unfortunately, one of the most common things I hear is people ‘normalize’ back pain and say, ‘Oh, I’m getting older. It’s normal to have back pain.’ I would argue it is not. It’s definitely something that can be addressed, and people don’t have to suffer in silence for years and years, assures Dr. Berthet. “That’s not a fun way to live.”

The Diagnostic Process

When evaluating someone with lower back pain, it’s essential to gather a detailed history. Dr. Berthet asks when the pain started, where it’s located, whether it radiates, and how it has progressed—whether it’s acute, chronic, or worsening over time. This information helps determine the nature of the pain. A physical exam follows, which may include listening to the heart and lungs, as well as assessing the painful area for other signs. If necessary, additional tests like blood work or imaging can be ordered to identify the underlying cause more accurately.

“Initially, it’s pretty straightforward,” he notes. “We talk, and then we do a physical exam. Then, we might, if need be, do a bit more investigation to see exactly what kind of back pain patients are experiencing, whether it’s in that first category or that second category. We can then go from there.”

Strengthen the “Front” to Protect the Back

Our bodies are designed to stand upright with balanced strength between the front and back. When that balance is lost—often due to inactivity, such as prolonged sitting—muscles can weaken, forcing others to overcompensate by becoming tight and painful. This imbalance commonly contributes to lower back pain.

To prevent or relieve it, maintaining strength and flexibility in both the back and abdominal muscles is key. Simple daily exercises like toe touches (to stretch the back), the Cobra pose (to stretch the front), planks (to strengthen the back), and crunches (to strengthen the front) can help restore that balance. Physical therapy is also a great option for those needing guided support.



“I think the best approach is a balance of doing a bit of stretching and strengthening,” urges Dr. Berthet. “Honestly, if we did each of those four exercises, one minute each per day, just four minutes total a day, I think that could help prevent a lot of back pain people encounter.”

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