

Low back pain

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It is not always clear what causes acute back pain. It may result from injuries to muscles, ligaments, bones, joints and discs in the back or to injury to a combination of these structures. Increased muscle tension, for whatever reason, can increase pain. It is not usually possible to make a precise diagnosis, but in most cases the pain settles in few days or weeks. If pain persists it is important to follow up with your doctor.

Managing acute low back pain

There are a few things you can do to help your back get better sooner:

- stay active – rest in bed should be limited to 2 days as it tends to cause everything to tighten up
- if pain interferes with your sleep and movements, then pain killing tablets may help. Anti-inflammatory tablets may also help
- try and walk as normally as possible. Avoid sitting or staying in the same position for too long
- stretching (back loosening) exercises can help relieve muscle pain and spasm. Having a warm shower first or using a hot pack on the affected area before exercise may make you more comfortable and allow you to move further
- try to build up to taking regular aerobic exercise such as walking, swimming and cycling. Start at a low rate (eg. 10 minutes per day) and increase by 5–10 minutes each week. Set your own goals
- if you suffer recurrent bouts of back pain, then back strengthening exercises may be helpful. Persevere and do not expect immediate results.

X-rays – do you need them?

Acute low back pain often derives from the soft tissues such as ligaments, muscles, tendons and nerves that don't show on X-rays. X-rays can only show up bones or the narrowing of spaces between vertebrae, they can't show pain. Therefore, in diagnosing acute low back pain, X-rays can be a waste of time and money. X-rays are usually not needed initially, unless you have suffered an impact injury causing a fracture. X-rays and CT scans involve radiation that can be harmful, especially to the sex organs.

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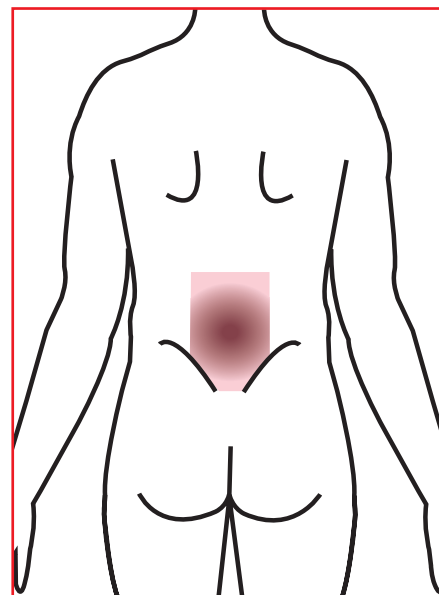


Figure 1. Diagram of the back. Red area indicates the area of low back pain

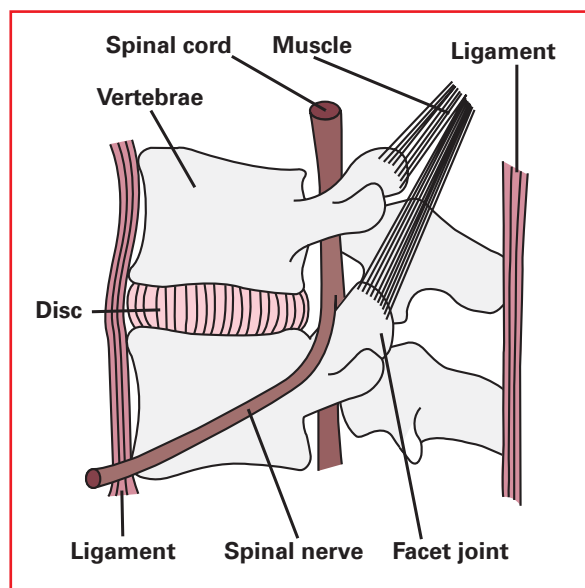


Figure 2. Structures that may cause pain
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