



Tips for Caring for Back Pain Flare Ups

Occasional flare-ups of back pain can occur even with diligent back care.

- ✓ **Rest initially** by curtailing activity or lying down. When lying on your back try placing a pillow or two beneath the knees to alleviate any back strain. This is the gentlest position on the back. It is advisable to move around for a few minutes at least every hour while awake to encourage circulation and healing.
- ✓ **Use ice or heat.** When injured/strained, the large muscles in the low back can become inflamed, go into spasm, cause pain and stiffness. Placing ice or heat to the affected area can provide pain relief by slowing the inflammation and swelling and heat will relax the muscle spasms. Apply heat or ice to the area for 15 minutes at a time, up to 3-5 times per day. A bag of frozen peas makes a great ice pack. Moist heat is preferable to dry. If no relief at all is obtained (or it aggravates the back), discontinue this step after a few days.
- ✓ **Exercise may be the best thing you can do** for your back. After resting for a few days, resume exercise in a controlled, gradual, progressive manner. This will help to tell your body to heal.
- ✓ **Pain medication, muscle relaxants and anti-inflammatory medications** can help to reduce the pain, swelling and muscle spasms. Check with your doctor to see which medication is best for you.
- ✓ **Relaxation techniques are very helpful.** Relaxation may help you let go of tension in the back muscles. Muscles are in constant communication with the central nervous system. Emotions can also tense muscles and cause muscle spasms. Pain itself can trigger anxiety, worry and in turn self-limit activities creating a downward spiral. Forms of relaxation are: diaphragmatic breathing, meditation, visualization, progressive muscle relaxation, humor, music, reading, talking to a friend, taking a walk, a warm bath, lighting scented candles.
- ✓ **Seek professional help if you do not start to improve** within a week or if the pain worsens. The answers to these questions will assist your doctor:
 - How long have you had this flare up?
 - What are your main symptoms — mid back, lower back, buttock/leg(s)?
 - How and when did it start?
 - What makes it worse?
 - What makes it better (even if only a little)?
 - Describe the pain: sharp, dull, electrical, burning, crushing, numbing etc.
 - How has it affected your activity level?
 - How intense is your pain, on average/typical, at best, and at worst on a 0-10 scale (10=worst).