Dealing with back pain

It’s a fact – eight out of ten Americans suffer some degree of back pain sometime in their lives. If you’ve ever had to deal with this common – but painful – problem, you know how it can affect your daily activities.

One misconception about back pain is that extended bed rest is the best treatment. Not so! Try to stay active, but always pay close attention to how you do things. Change positions frequently throughout the day. Here are some other important things to remember:

**Good body mechanics** (keeping good posture during daily activities):

- When moving from one position to another, do **NOT** twist or rotate your trunk.
- Limit or eliminate lifting. If you must lift, make sure to bend your knees and keep your back straight. Keep all objects close to your body as you lift them.
- If you are sitting, support your lower back with a pillow or rolled up towel. Avoid sitting on a couch or chair that’s too low for you to sit comfortably.
- If you sleep on your side, place a pillow between your knees. If you sleep on your back, try a pillow under your knees.
- When getting into a car, sit down first. Then, move your whole body as a unit to swing your legs in. To get out of a car, simply reverse the process.

**Heat or ice?**

Generally, it’s recommended that ice be used to treat back pain for 72 hours following an injury – but no more than 10 to 20 minutes at a time. After that, either ice or heat can be used – whichever seems to help most. Ice or heat can be reapplied every two hours.

Before you begin icing a back injury, make sure to place a thin dish towel or pillowcase between your skin and the ice treatment. Do not put ice or cold packs directly on unprotected skin.

Need to create your own cold packs? Try placing the following items in the freezer:

- Crushed ice in a plastic bag.
- A bag of un-popped popcorn.
- Frozen vegetables in a bag.
- Three cups water and one cup rubbing alcohol mixed together in a Ziploc® bag.

Heat can be applied with a heating pad, a warm wet towel or a hot water bottle – but for no longer than 20 minutes. Do **NOT** use menthol creams before using a heating pad – the combination can cause burns.

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Exercise
Until your pain subsides, you may have to eliminate some specific movements in your regular exercise routine. These may include:

- Sit ups/crunches
- Leg lifts (lifting one or both legs while laying on your back)
- Hamstring stretches

Recommended activity
An ideal way to safely increase activity is to walk for short distances on level surfaces (no inclines) at least three times a day – as tolerated.

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If you’d like to take advantage of outpatient physical therapy to treat your back pain, just ask your doctor or physician’s assistant about getting a referral. A physical therapist will be able to evaluate and treat your back pain – and may even prescribe specialized equipment for pain relief, including ultrasound (deep heat), electrical stimulation or traction.

Physical therapists can also show you appropriate home exercises designed to increase strength and flexibility in your back. A physical therapist will instruct you in proper body mechanics that not only help your recover from existing back pain, but help you prevent similar injuries in the future.

Most insurances cover outpatient physical therapy.

Therapy Plus Locations

St. Luke’s Therapy Plus has three convenient locations throughout Cedar Rapids. Patients can be seen at any location.

Therapy Plus – Downtown
830 First Avenue NE
319/369-8107

Therapy Plus – Southwest
3245 Williams Parkway SW
319/861-6900

Therapy Plus – Marion
2996 7th Avenue, Marion
319/286-4346

Please contact any of the Therapy Plus clinics for more information.