

# Low Back Pain (Lumbalgia)

## TERMINOLOGY (SYNONYMS)

- Low back pain

## INTRODUCTION

The back is an intricate part of the body comprised up of bone, muscles, nerves and other supportive soft tissues. The spine helps protect vital organs, supports the upright body and allows for movement. Its function is essential for nearly every move you make. The repeated exposure of the spine to mechanical stresses each day makes it vulnerable to injury and inflammation. Neck and back pain can be extremely disabling. Approximately 8 out of 10 adults will develop a significant episode of back pain during their life. In fact, back pain is one of the most common reasons for health care visits to primary care physicians.

Acute or short-term low back pain generally lasts from a few days to a few weeks. Most acute back pain is the result of trauma to the lower back or a disorder such as arthritis. Pain from trauma may be caused by a sports injury, work around the house or in the garden, or a sudden jolt such as a car accident or other stresses that injure the spine and surrounding tissues. Symptoms may range from muscle ache to shooting or stabbing pain, limited flexibility and range of motion, or an inability to stand straight. Chronic back pain is pain that persists for more than 3 months. It is often progressive and the cause can be difficult to determine.

There are many different causes for back pain. It can be very complex. Some back pain can be prevented. Self-care, activity modification and proper body mechanics can often help reduce back pain within a few weeks. Persistent, progressive or traumatic back pain often requires medical attention. Surgery is rarely needed to treat back pain. The diagnosis of lumbalgia may be used initially until a more specific diagnosis is reached after testing. In many cases the precise cause of the low back pain can not be determined so the diagnosis of lumbalgia will be used.

## PREVALENCE

Nearly everyone has low back pain sometime during their life. Men and women are equally affected. It occurs most often between ages 30 and 50, due in part to the aging process but also as a result of sedentary life styles with too little (sometimes punctuated by too much) exercise. The risk of experiencing low back pain from disc disease or spinal degeneration increases with age.

Low back pain unrelated to injury or other known cause is unusual in pre-teen children. However, back pain from an overloaded backpack can quickly strain the back and cause muscle fatigue. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that more than 13,260 injuries related to backpacks were treated at doctors' offices, clinics, and emergency rooms in the year 2000. To avoid back strain, it is recommended that a backpack contain no more than 20% of a child's body weight. Children carrying backpacks should bend both knees when lifting heavy packs, visit their locker or desk between classes to lighten loads or replace books, purchase a backpack tote on wheels. Some schools have solved the problem by giving the student a second copy of their textbooks to keep at home.

