

Low Back Pain

Patient Education

[About one third](#) of Americans suffer from low back pain, and the diagnosis and treatment costs exceed \$90 billion nationwide. Those treatments are not always best-in-class: a significant percentage of lower back pain treatments are deemed unnecessary and even [harmful](#) for patients. And low back pain is the [number one reason](#) patients are prescribed opioids – which can expose them to an addictive substance [without substantial or sustainable relief](#) from their pain. Because [opioid abuse claims about 142 lives per day](#), it’s essential that patients know what choices they have for treatment, including non-opioid alternatives that have been proven to be just as effective and safer than opioids.

There are a number of non-opioid options available to help patients manage their pain. These may include prescription and over-the-counter pharmaceutical options, as well as integrative therapies focusing on mind-body training, stress management, exercise, and manipulation of the spine. This guide is designed to help patients and their doctor explore a variety of safe, effective ways to manage and relieve pain.

Treating Low Back Pain

Your doctor will help you decide which treatment option is best suited for your type of back pain. Often, your treatment plan may combine or sequence different options for the treatment most effective for you.

Exercise	Research shows that regular, gentle exercises for mobility and stretching can reduce low back pain. Exercises can be self-guided or supported by a Physical Therapist.
Nonsteroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs)	Research shows that NSAIDs (e.g., ibuprofen) often work just as well as prescription opioids and are much safer. Many NSAIDs are available over-the-counter, making them easy and affordable for pain relief. In fact, more than a third of Americans use over-the-counter medications like ibuprofen or aspirin for their back pain.
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	In CBT, a mental health professional works with a patient on practical approaches to better manage their stress and pain. CBT may be covered as a behavioral health benefit. Research on the impact of weekly 2-hour CBT group sessions over 8 weeks found that patients have small to moderate improvements in function and pain. Improvements last 1 to 2 years after the sessions and may also improve your quality of life and reduce depression.
Physical Therapy (PT)	Physical therapy (PT) can cover a wide range of different techniques to decrease back pain. Over a series of personalized sessions, a physical therapist may help patients with specific exercises and stretching, or may engage in other modalities, such as heat application, ice packs, and electrical stimulation to reduce pain and increase mobility.
Acupuncture	Acupuncture involves inserting thin needles into different strategic points in the body to alleviate pain and stimulate blood flow. A licensed acupuncturist will help determine these points based on your type of pain. The procedure is often repeated over a series of visits. Evidence for how well acupuncture works for the treatment of low back pain continues to evolve. Looking at the impact of two 20-minute sessions/week for 3 weeks, followed by one 20-minute session/week for 4 weeks, patients had small to moderate improvements in function and pain. The potential harms of acupuncture are very low.

Chiropractic Services	Chiropractic services focus on disorders of the of musculoskeletal and nervous systems. Chiropractors specialize in manual therapy techniques, including spinal manipulation, to help patients manage musculoskeletal pain.
Yoga	Yoga is a mind-body practice that involves a series of different postures and emphasizing breathing techniques. Yoga can be a self-guided practice or done under the supervision of a yoga instructor. Restorative, therapeutic or hatha yoga classes would be the best fit for lower back pain. Research looking at the impact of a weekly 75-minute yoga session over a course of 12 weeks found small to moderate benefits in pain and function, but with a lower strength of evidence. As with acupuncture, the potential harms of acupuncture are low, and the potential benefits of yoga should we weighed accordingly.

Choosing A Treatment

There are many causes and contributors of low back pain, so there is no single approach to treatment that is right in every case. For some people, one form of treatment will be all they need. Others may need to use different forms of treatment together to see the best results. Talk to your doctor about your treatment goals so you can develop a pain management treatment plan that is best for you.