Return-to-Work Plan for People With Low Back Pain: Care Instructions

Overview

You may be worried about going back to work. Once you have had low back pain, you may be afraid that the pain will come back. This fear may cause you to limit your activities.

Low back pain can be acute or chronic. If it has lasted less than 3 months, it is acute. It is chronic if it has lasted more than 3 months. Staying active while protecting your back may help keep your pain from becoming chronic.

If your work involves a lot of sitting, standing, or lifting, you may need to change the way you do your job. But getting back to work and other activities may actually help you get better. This is because movement keeps your back flexible and the muscles strong, and staying in bed or avoiding activity for more than a day or two can actually make your pain worse.

You will probably feel better being back in your normal routine. A positive outlook may also help you feel better.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

How can you care for yourself at home?

Self-care strategies

- **Pay attention to your posture**. After your back has been strained or injured, bad posture can make pain worse.

    - Stand or sit tall, with your shoulders back and your stomach pulled in to support your back. Your ears and shoulders should be lined up over your hips.
    - Anytime you begin to feel pain in your back, check your posture. You may be able to fix the problem by paying attention to how you are sitting or standing.

- **Get some exercise every day**. Exercise may not only help treat low back pain, but it may also help keep your back from hurting again.
    - Each day, try to do some stretching and some exercises to strengthen your stomach, back, and legs.
    - You should also do daily exercises that get your heart rate up, such as walking, swimming, or biking.

- **Do not smoke**. Smoking decreases blood flow and slows healing. If you need help quitting, talk to your doctor about stop-smoking programs and medicines. These can increase your chances of quitting for good.
- **Take pain medicines exactly as directed.**
    - If the doctor gave you a prescription medicine for pain, take it as prescribed.
    - If you are not taking a prescription pain medicine, ask your doctor if you can take an over-the-counter medicine.

Make changes at work

Talk to your supervisor or human resources department. They may have good ideas on how you can protect your back at work. Some companies have experts who can suggest different tools or ways to do your job.

- You may need to develop a gradual return-to-work plan. Be honest about what you feel you can and cannot do. If you need it, your doctor can give you a prescription for shorter work days or fewer duties.
- If you know parts of your job are putting stress on your back, ask if there are other ways you can do those jobs. Or ask if someone else could take over that work.
- If your job involves a lot of sitting, you may be able to get a better chair. Chairs that are adjustable or that have lumbar supports may help you.

Ergonomics means matching the human body to the job. By studying your work environment and the tools you use, you can reduce your chances of back pain.

- You are more likely to have low back pain if you work intensely for long periods of time without breaks. Take regular breaks and do stretching exercises to reduce this risk. Try to take 3- to 5-minute breaks, or change tasks, every 20 to 40 minutes.
- If your job involves a lot of sitting:
    - Place a small pillow, a rolled-up towel, or a lumbar roll in the curve of your back for extra support.
    - Sit in a chair that is low enough that you can place both feet flat on the floor. Your knees should be slightly lower than your hips when you are sitting.
    - Try a kneeling chair or an exercise ball. A kneeling chair tilts your hips forward. This takes pressure off your lower back. An exercise ball can rock from side to side, which helps keep your back loose.

- If your job involves lifting:

    - Hold the object close to you.
    - Bend your knees and keep your back straight as you grasp the object, then straighten your knees to lift it up. Try to avoid twisting.
    - Set down your load carefully, squatting with your knees and hips only.

- When you lift:
    - Do not try to lift something by yourself that is too heavy or too awkward to carry, or that will not allow you to see where you are walking.
    - Do not rely on a "back belt" to protect your back. Studies have not shown them to be effective.

- You may be able to get more information on ergonomics from your state Department of Labor, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), or the National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety (NIOSH).

Where can you learn more?

Go to https://www.healthwise.net/patiented

Enter **K081** in the search box to learn more about **"Return-to-Work Plan for People With Low Back Pain: Care Instructions".**

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