



## PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUTS

### Backache Teen Version

#### What is a backache?

A backache is pain and stiffness in the back. The middle or lower back is the most common area to have pain. Backaches are most common during adolescence.

With a backache:

- The pain is worsened by bending.
- The muscles on either side of the spine are tender or in spasm.

#### What causes backaches?

Backaches are usually caused by straining some of the 200 muscles in the back that allow us to stand upright. Often the strain is caused by carrying something too heavy (such as schoolbags), lifting from an awkward position, or overexertion of back muscles (for example, from digging).

Spondylolysis, or a stress fracture, may cause lower back pain in teens. Stress fractures may happen in sports such as gymnastics and football. Pain is usually mild and may spread to the buttocks and legs. It feels worse with activity and better with rest. With a stress fracture, you may notice that you tend to walk stiff-legged and with a shorter stride than usual.

#### How long does it last?

The pain and discomfort are usually gone in 1 to 2 weeks. However, it is common to have backaches many times, depending on your activities and health.

#### How can I take care of myself?

- **Pain-relief medicines** Take acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Continue this until 24 hours have passed without any pain. This medicine is the most important part of the therapy because back pain causes muscle spasm and these medicines can greatly reduce both the spasm and the pain.
- **Cold** During the first 2 days, massage the sore muscles with a cold pack or ice pack for 20 minutes 4 times per day. To avoid frostbite, do not leave the cold packs on too long.
- **Heat** After 2 days, put a heating pad or hot water bottle on the most painful area for 20 minutes to relieve muscle spasm. Do this whenever the pain flares up.
- **Sleeping position** The most comfortable sleeping position is usually on your side with your knees bent. The mattress should be firm or reinforced with a board.
- **Activity** Avoid lifting, jumping, horseback riding, motorcycle riding, and exercise until you are completely well. Complete bed rest is unnecessary.

## How can I prevent backaches?

The best way to prevent future backaches is to keep your back muscles in good physical condition. This will require 5 minutes of back and abdominal exercises every day.

Helpful exercises are:

- **Standing hamstring stretch:** Place the heel of your leg on a stool about 15 inches high. Keep your knee straight. Lean forward, bending at the hips until you feel a mild stretch in the back of your thigh. Make sure you do not roll your shoulders and bend at the waist when doing this or you will stretch your lower back instead. Hold the stretch for 15 to 30 seconds. Repeat 3 times. Repeat the same stretch on your other leg.
- **Cat and camel:** Get down on your hands and knees. Let your stomach sag, allowing your back to curve downward. Hold this position for 5 seconds. Then arch your back and hold for 5 seconds. Do 3 sets of 10.
- **Quadruped Arm/Leg Raises:** Get down on your hands and knees. Tighten your abdominal muscles to stiffen your spine. While keeping your abdominals tight, raise one arm and the opposite leg away from you. Hold this position for 5 seconds. Lower your arm and leg slowly and alternate sides. Do this 10 times on each side.
- **Pelvic tilt:** Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Tighten your abdominal muscles and push your lower back into the floor. Hold this position for 5 seconds, then relax. Do 3 sets of 10.
- **Lower trunk rotation:** Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Tighten your abdominal muscles and push your lower back into the floor. Keeping your shoulders down flat, gently rotate your legs to one side, then the other as far as you can. Repeat 10 to 20 times.
- **Piriformis stretch:** Lying on your back with both knees bent, rest the ankle of one leg over the opposite knee. Grasp the thigh of the bottom leg and pull that knee toward your chest. You will feel a stretch along the buttocks and possibly along the outside of your hip on the top leg. Hold this for 15 to 30 seconds. Repeat 3 times. Switch legs and do the same stretch again.
- **Double knee to chest:** Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Tighten your abdominal muscles and push your lower back into the floor. Pull both knees up to your chest. Hold for 5 seconds and repeat 10 to 20 times.
- **Partial curl:** Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Tighten your stomach muscles and flatten your back against the floor. Tuck your chin to your chest. With your hands stretched out in front of you, curl your upper body forward until your shoulders clear the floor. Hold this position for 3 seconds. Don't hold your breath. It helps to breathe out as you lift your shoulders up. Relax. Repeat 10 times. Build to 3 sets of 10. To challenge yourself, clasp your hands behind your head and keep your elbows out to the side.

Do not do the partial curls or the prone hip extension exercises until the back pain is gone. You should also try to be physically active for at least 30 minutes every day.

Also, learn how to properly lift heavy objects:

- To lift heavy objects, bend your knees and not your back.
- Never lift something while your back is twisted.
- Carry heavy objects close to your body and use both arms.

## When should I call my healthcare provider?

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- The pain becomes very severe AND persists more than 2 hours after taking a pain medicine.
- You can't walk.

- You have pain, tingling, or weakness in the legs.
- You have changes in bowel or bladder function.
- You start feeling very sick.

Call during office hours if:

- The pain is no better after 3 days of treatment.
- The pain is still present after 2 weeks.
- You have other concerns or questions.

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