

Back Pain Myths vs. Facts

Myth 1

Back pain is usually due to serious disease or injury of the spine.

Myth 2

X-Rays, MRIs, and CT scans can always identify the cause of pain.

Myth 3

Back pain is usually caused by a “slipped disc pinching a nerve.”

Myth 4

Surgery is the only way to cure low back pain.

Myth 5

Back pain is usually disabling.

Fact:

Anyone who has experienced back pain can tell you that it can be extremely painful. The good news is, that despite the pain, research shows that most back pain is not caused by any serious disease or injury.

Fact:

Because low back pain is not commonly caused by serious disease or injury, these tests are not always useful. In fact, for the most common back conditions, these tests can cause more confusion than clarity. Many abnormalities seen on these tests, such as “slipped disc” or “degeneration,” are also seen in people who have never experienced back pain.

Fact:

Research shows that very few people have a true slipped disc that will pinch a nerve. In reality, for the majority of back pain sufferers, it is difficult to identify the exact cause of the pain. Although many people find this uncertainty frustrating, the positive side of the situation is that one can rest better knowing there is nothing seriously wrong.

Fact:

Medical experts estimate that less than 5% of people with back pain require surgery. Even those who do have a “slipped disc” (causing a nerve to be pinched) can often be helped without the need for surgery.

Fact:

Back pain is a very common condition affecting 4 out of 5 adults at some point in their lives. In addition, many people who experience back pain will endure another episode within a two-year time frame. Even though back pain recurrences happen, this does not necessarily mean that something is seriously wrong or that it will last forever. The long-term outlook is good and there are a number of things one can do to maintain a healthy back.

Myths vs. Facts (continued)

Myth 6

Long periods of bed rest is the best treatment for low back pain.

Fact:

We now know that a long period of bed rest is the worst possible treatment for back pain. Too much bed rest will stiffen joints, weaken bones and muscles, and can actually make the pain feel worse. Studies show that 1 or 2 days of bed rest is all that is normally required following the onset of back pain.

Myth 7

If your back hurts you should take it easy.

Fact:

Many people with back pain think that it is dangerous to resume their normal daily activities, because they fear doing more damage to their back. While you may have to change the way you do some of your activities in the beginning, it is important that you get moving as soon as possible and stay moving. With back problems there is an important difference between "hurt" and "harm." There is no avoiding it, resuming your daily activities will "hurt". However, the good news is you are not doing any "harm" to your back. Studies show that getting moving again will actually help you recover faster.

Myth 8

When your back hurts, it is helpful to sit for long periods of time in a soft chair.

Fact:

Generally speaking, staying in just one position for a long period of time is not a good idea. This is especially true when sitting on a soft chair. A soft chair allows your back to sag, which stresses your back and can cause your pain to worsen. Have you ever noticed, after sitting in this position, that it is very difficult and painful to stand up straight?

Myth 9

When you have back pain you should avoid exercise.

Fact:

Your back needs movement to be healthy. Exercise will keep your joints loose and prevent your bones and muscles from weakening, thus allowing you to heal faster. Even when your back "hurts" you can begin exercising without doing any "harm." Examples of good exercises when you have back pain are walking, swimming, yoga and riding a stationary bike. Try some or all of these to find the exercise that works best for you. Start slowly, and try to do a little more each day.

Myth 10

Physical laborers have the highest risk for developing back pain.

Fact:

Under-working your back can be just as bad as over-working you back. Many Americans spend most of their days sitting. We sit at work, in our car, and on the couch at home. People who sit a lot also have a higher risk for developing back pain. Remember, your back needs movement to stay healthy. Get up and get active!



Back To HealthSM Challenge



People often receive mixed messages about back pain.

Test your knowledge. Complete this challenge to see if you know the difference between myths and facts.

Circle either *Myth* or *Fact*. Correct answers are provided on the reverse side of this sheet.

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|-------------|-------------|--|
| Myth | Fact | 1. Back pain is usually due to a serious disease or injury of the spine. |
| Myth | Fact | 2. X-Rays, MRIs, and CT scans cannot always identify the cause of pain. |
| Myth | Fact | 3. Back pain is not only caused by a “slipped disc pinching a nerve.” |
| Myth | Fact | 4. Surgery is the only way to cure low back pain. |
| Myth | Fact | 5. Back pain is always disabling. |
| Myth | Fact | 6. Long periods of bed rest is not always the best treatment for low back pain. |
| Myth | Fact | 7. If your back hurts you should take it easy. |
| Myth | Fact | 8. When you back hurts, it is not helpful to sit for long periods in a soft chair. |
| Myth | Fact | 9. When you have back pain you should continue to exercise. |
| Myth | Fact | 10. Physical laborers have the highest risk for developing back pain. |

1. **Myth** — Anyone who has experienced back pain can tell you that it can be extremely painful. The good news is, that despite the pain, research shows that most back pain is not caused by any serious disease or injury.
2. **Fact** — Because low back pain is not commonly caused by serious disease or injury, these tests are not always useful. In fact, for the most common back conditions, these tests can cause more confusion than clarity. Many abnormalities seen on these tests, such as “slipped disc” or “degeneration,” are also seen in people who have never had back pain.
3. **Fact** — Research shows that very few people have a true slipped disc that will pinch a nerve. In reality, for the majority of back pain sufferers, it is difficult to identify the exact cause of the pain. Although many people find this uncertainty frustrating, the positive side of the situation is that one can rest better knowing there is nothing seriously wrong.
4. **Myth** — Medical experts estimate that less than 5% of people with back pain require surgery. Even those who do have a “slipped disc” (causing a nerve to be pinched) can often be helped without the need for surgery.
5. **Myth** — Back pain is a very common condition affecting 4 out of 5 adults at some point in their lives. In addition, many people who experience back pain will endure another episode within a two-year time frame. Even though back pain recurrences happen, this does not necessarily mean that something is seriously wrong or that it will last forever. The long-term outlook is good and there are a number of things one can do to maintain a healthy back.
6. **Fact** — We now know that a long period of bed rest is the worst possible treatment for back pain. Too much bed rest will stiffen joints, weaken bones and muscles, and can actually make the pain feel worse. Studies show that 1 or 2 days of bed rest is all that is normally required following the onset of back pain.
7. **Myth** — Many people with back pain think that it is dangerous to resume their normal daily activities, because they fear doing more damage to their back. While you may have to change the way you do some of your activities in the beginning, it is important that you get moving as soon as possible and stay moving. With back problems there is an important difference between “hurt” and “harm.” There is no avoiding it, resuming your daily activities will “hurt”. However, the good news is you are not doing any “harm” to your back. Studies show that getting moving again will actually help you recover faster.
8. **Fact** — Generally speaking, staying in just one position for a long period of time is not a good idea. This is especially true when sitting on a soft chair. A soft chair allows your back to sag, which stresses your back and can cause your pain to worsen. Have you ever noticed, after sitting in this position, that it is very difficult and painful to stand up straight?
9. **Fact** — Your back needs movement to be healthy. Exercise will keep your joints loose and prevent your bones and muscles from weakening, thus allowing you to heal faster. Even when your back “hurts” you can begin exercising without doing any “harm.” Examples of good exercises when you have back pain are walking, swimming, yoga and riding a stationary bike. Try some or all of these to find the exercise that works best for you. Start slowly, and try to do a little more each day.
10. **Myth** — Under-working your back can be just as bad as over-working you back. Many Americans spend most of their days sitting. We sit at work, in our car, and on the couch at home. People who sit a lot also have a higher risk for developing back pain. Remember, your back needs movement to stay healthy. Get up and get active!

