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Back Attack

DOS & DON'TS

- Avoid things that can make the pain worse, like sitting for a long time, lifting heavy objects, or bending or twisting.
- Stick to your normal activities as much as you can. Gentle exercise like walking helps you get better more quickly.
- Some over-the-counter medicines can help kill pain or swelling. These include aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen and paracetamol.
- Try using heating pads or taking a warm bath or shower.
- Stay active. Get a doctor or physiotherapist to teach you some gentle exercises to help stretch your back and make the muscles stronger.

Signs of trouble

GO TO A DOCTOR IF...

You experience numbness or tingling

It is a severe pain that doesn't improve with rest within 48 hours

The pain is caused by a fall or an injury

The pain radiates down your leg

Your leg, foot, groin or rectal area feel numb

You develop fever, nausea or vomiting, stomachache, weakness or excessive sweating

There is loss of bladder control

The pain is so severe that you can't move

Mild pain that persists for two weeks

Back pain affects four in five people at some point of their lives. Treated right, it can disappear within days

Sanchita Sharma

WHILE WE'VE ALL seen them, the ads about people who develop an acute back pain while playing with their child. In the throes of spasm, they use the miracle spray or ointment being advertised and get back to swinging their overweight child up in the air.

While these ads may get a thumbs-up for good parenting, orthopaedists are universally disapproving, calling these ads misleading.

"Acute back pain that starts quickly if you fall, twist or lift something too heavy should be taken seriously as the cause could be the rupture or collapse of one or more discs located between the vertebrae of the spine," says Dr S K. S. Marya, Director Orthopaedics and Institute of Joint Replacement Surgery, Max Healthcare.

Sprays and ointments work for sprains and muscular pain and should always be accompanied with some rest. "When it comes to the lower back, you can't just apply an ointment and get back to business the next minute as it may aggravate the pain and lead to

complications," he adds

Back pain ranging from a dull, constant ache to a sudden, sharp pain that affects movement affects almost everyone at some point in their lives. While acute back pain usually lasts for a few days, chronic pain may last for months. Hot packs can help relax painful muscle spasms, as can massages and painkillers such as aspirin, paracetamol and ibuprofen, which help reduce pain and swelling.

Usually, a combination of the above is all that's needed. "Pain should improve in 48 hours and a dull pain in a week or two. If it doesn't, go to a doctor to identify the cause. Get a diagnosis also if the pain recurs within intervals of two to three days," says Dr Marya.

Repetitive stress injury of the spinal cord caused by poor posture, overweight, frequent twisting and lifting, smoking, infection or disease can cause chronic pain. "Every pain is not caused by a strained muscle. Back pain can also indicate other medical conditions, such as tuberculosis, osteoporosis, arthritis, kidney stones, infections or tumours," says Dr Yash Gulati, senior orthopedic surgeon, Apollo Hospitals.

Exercising and keeping your back muscles strong are among the best ways to lower risk of pain, as is bending the

knees and keeping your back straight to pick up heavy things. People with back pain should go for low-intensity exercise that does not involve awkward or stressful action that requires the back muscles to exert a lot of force. These include swimming, bicycling (stationary or regular) and walking to strengthen the erector spinae and abdominal muscles.

"Staying active is even more important if you want to protect yourself from a relapse following an initial episode of acute back pain. I tell my patients that if US President George Bush can take out half an hour for exercise, so can you," says Dr Gulati.

Sleeping right also helps keep the back free of pain. Choose a mattress that is firm enough to support the spine and follows the body's contours. Sleep on your side with your body curled up and use a pillow that keeps the head level with the spine. The good news is that most people with back pain don't need surgery, even if the pain is chronic.

Dr Gulati also insists his patients quit smoking. "It's very well established that smoking aggravates back pain. Nicotine hampers the flow of blood to the vertebrae and discs and also aggravates osteoporosis by making smokers lose bone faster than nonsmokers," he says.

