

BACK PAIN

CONSERVATIVE TREATMENT (OBSERVATION) FOR LOW BACK PAIN

Conservative treatment allows the body time to recover on its own, aided by a combination of rest, basic self-care with heat and cold application, lifestyle management, and a carefully planned exercise or physiotherapy program.

Before beginning conservative treatment

Even simple actions or exercise can have side effects or complications, especially when individuals with back pain do not have a confirmed diagnosis of their medical condition. For this reason, conservative treatment — or any other treatment program — should begin with a doctor consultation or referral and should be subsequently followed under medical supervision.

The healing time with conservative treatment varies from case to case. However, improvement should be seen after four to seven days.¹ Seek medical attention if there is no improvement or if the condition worsens during this time.

Contact Cigna at any time for guidance on what to take into consideration when making decisions on your treatment. You can also consult our Treatment Guide for practical advice.

What does conservative treatment involve?

The main components of a conservative treatment program are rest, basic self-care, physiotherapy, exercise, weight management and lifestyle management. Medications may be also prescribed for additional relief.¹

In this guide...

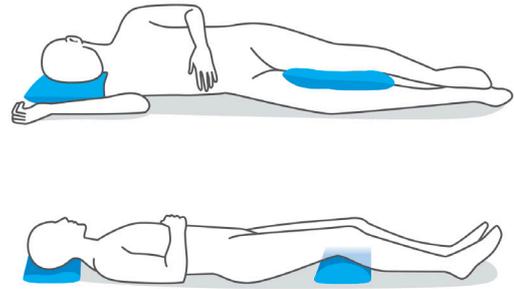
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Rest

Getting adequate rest is important. This means not pushing your body too far at work or in daily errands and activities, not engaging in strenuous exercise and making sure your stress levels are under control.

In most back pain cases, rest does not mean staying in bed for long periods of time. In fact, too much bed rest can prove detrimental to the healing process, making the muscles weaker and stiffer. When this happens, the recovery process can be slower and more painful.

Therefore, while back pain sufferers may benefit from very small amounts of bed rest, the only individuals for whom bed rest is actually recommended are those with unstable spinal conditions, such as spinal fracture, who are waiting for surgical interventions.^{2,3}



If you feel that bed rest is absolutely necessary, limit this time to a maximum of two to three hours and only for one or two days. Strategic pillow placement can help ensure that your back does not receive unnecessary strain: under the head and between the knees (lying on your side); under the knees (lying on your back); under the hips (lying on your stomach).³

Heat and cold application

The use of hot or cold can alleviate pain and reduce swelling. Both are generally used in conjunction with other conservative treatment measures.

Hot and cold safety precautions

Always follow your doctor's recommendations for using hot and cold devices or applications.

In general, use hot and cold for no longer than 15 minutes, allowing more than two hours between application.

Never put hot or cold (such as ice or ice cubes or gel packs) directly against the skin. These can cause severe burning.

Ice or cold packs help to cause blood vessels to constrict, and are generally recommended to reduce swelling and spasms in injuries or strains that have recently occurred. Cold can also be effective after exercising. Heating pads or hot compresses are more useful after 48 hours as they work to relax tense muscles and encourage blood flow to the affected area.^{4,5} Moreover, some individuals respond better to hot than cold, and vice

versa. Alternating hot and cold is also an option, ending with the cold option.⁴

Examples of home cold therapy for the lower back include applying a bag of frozen peas or ice pack covered with a dishcloth to the area.⁴

Examples of home heat therapy include hot water bottles, heating pads, and warm water baths.⁵

Physical therapy

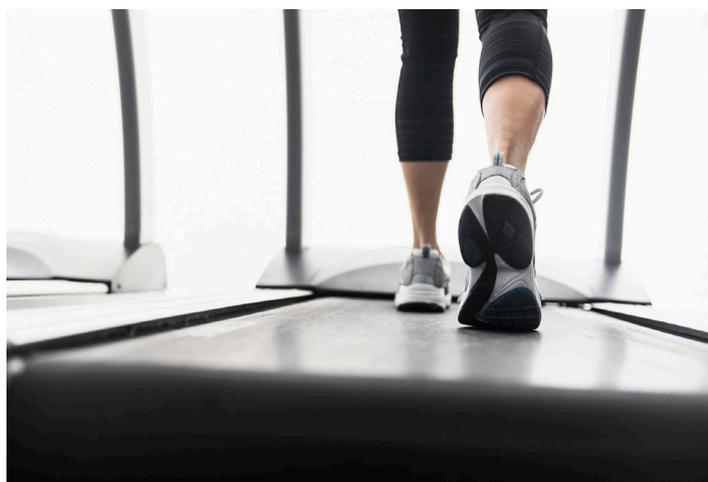
Also known as manual therapy, physical therapy involves working with a professional physiotherapist to follow a rehabilitation program. The exercises included in a rehabilitation program work with the spine and its supporting components, such as the joints, muscles, and ligaments.⁶ The goals of a physical therapy program extend beyond the actual rehabilitation sessions, including patient education on posture, stretching, and self-management, as well as prevention strategies against new or relapsed occurrences. Physical therapy can keep the body active and shorten recovery time.⁷



The first session of physiotherapy should include a complete review of your medical history and diagnostic findings, in order to ensure that the treatment followed is appropriate.⁸

Exercise

Most lower back pain conditions benefit from gentle exercise in order to keep the area as supple as possible and prevent muscle hardening or wasting (atrophy). Even simple movements and exercises help the rest of the body stay strong and better able to support and assist in the healing process.



Walking is the simplest and possibly the best exercise for the lower back, promoting circulation and muscle strength as the body heals. However, there are many other options, and your doctor or

physical therapist can recommend more specific exercises based on your particular condition.

Consult our guide on exercise for lower back pain.

Lifestyle management

Individuals who are tired, poorly nourished, or under stress will find it harder to heal and recover from lower back conditions and lower back pain. Therefore, getting enough sleep, paying attention to diet and lifestyle, consuming adequate amounts of vitamin C and calcium, and keeping stress levels in check is a fundamental part of a back pain treatment program.



For more information, please consult our back pain lifestyle and prevention guides.



Weight management

Overweight or obesity can contribute to the development of medical conditions in the lower back or chronic back pain. Excess body weight can also aggravate existing conditions and pain. For this reason, taking steps to reach and maintain a healthy weight can make a significant difference.

Please consult our guide to weight management for back pain.

Questions about your diagnosis?

Unsure which treatment is right for you?

Did you know you have access to a free, independent and confidential decision support service?

Discuss your concerns and have your case reviewed by a specialist in your condition.

The decision is yours. And we're with you all the way.

