

fact sheet

Strain/Sprain-Low Back

Also known as: Lumbar back strain

Mechanical low back

What is it?

Lumbar (low back) muscle strains and sprains are a common cause of low back pain. The back is prone to this strain because of its weight-bearing function and involvement in moving, twisting, and bending. Lumbar muscle strain is caused when muscle fibers are abnormally stretched or torn. Lumbar sprain is caused when ligaments, the tough bands of tissue that hold bones together, are torn from their attachments. When the lumbar spine is strained or sprained, the soft tissues become inflamed. This inflammation causes pain and may cause muscle spasms.

How is it diagnosed? Signs/symptoms

- Low back pain that may radiate into the buttocks, but does not affect the legs
- Stiffness in the low back area restricting range of motion
- Inability to maintain normal posture due to stiffness and/or pain
- Muscle spasms either with activity or rest
- Pain that persists longer than 10-14 days

Tests:

Diagnostic testing is usually not necessary, unless pain has been present for more than six weeks and has not improved as expected. Then it is important to rule out unrelated causes such as an undetected disc injury. If symptoms are persistent, the following tests may be ordered by your doctor: X-ray, CT scan, or MRI.

How is it treated?

Many people believe that resting is the best way to heal, but when it comes to back pain it's important to understand that "hurt doesn't equal harm". Prolonged bed rest can lead to a loss of muscle strength and may increase muscle stiffness, adding to pain and discomfort. The most important thing is to get moving again. Activity and stretching will usually help with pain relief. Strain and sprain is commonly treated with anti-inflammatory medication plus a chiropractic or physiotherapy program, supplemented with a home exercise program. Walking is especially beneficial.

Common Medications

Anti-inflammatories
Analgesics

Predicted Outcome

The prognosis is excellent for a complete recovery within one month from a lumbar strain/sprain.

What is the expected return to work?

Job Classification	RTW Minimum-Maximum
Sedentary Work	0 – 1 week
Light Work	0 – 2 weeks
Medium Work	0 – 4 weeks
Heavy Work	0 – 4 weeks
Very Heavy Work	0 – 4 weeks

Work Restrictions/Accommodations

It is important to stay active and continue as normal as possible. Try to remain at work or get back as soon as possible even if you still have low back pain. The longer you stay off work, the more likely you are to develop long term disability.

Temporary avoidance of heavy lifting and prolonged standing may be necessary depending on your job requirements.

Staying Active

Keeping your back moving will stop the working parts from seizing up. It may hurt a bit at first, but it does not do any damage - hurt is not the same as harm. It's worth working through any initial discomfort because you'll get back to normal that much quicker.

Simply continue to do your ordinary activities as normally as possible. Being fit and active will help you get better faster and prevent more back trouble later.

Prevention Tips

- Do abdominal muscle strengthening exercises to provide more spine stability, such as swimming, stationary bicycling, and walking.
- Use correct lifting techniques
- Maintain correct posture when you're sitting or standing
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Avoid smoking and stressful situations
- Change positions often
- ***Getting back to your normal routines can be an important part of recovering from an episode of acute low back pain; get on with your life- you really can help yourself!***