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Improving patient understanding of low back pain in the primary care setting

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PATIENT INFO: LOW BACK PAIN

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What is low back pain?

The low back is made up of the bottom portion of the spinal column and its supporting muscles. Low back pain (LBP), also known as lumbago, is a common complaint that can affect people of all ages. In fact, 8 out of 10 individuals will experience LBP at some point in their lives. The pain will usually go away on its own without treatment.

Common causes of LBP:

INJURY from overuse, bad posture, or sudden twisting movements

HERNIATED DISC a cushion in the spinal column bulges out and pinches a nerve; can cause leg pain or “sciatica”

DEGENERATIVE JOINT DISEASE arthritis of the spine

SPINAL STENOSIS an abnormal narrowing of the spinal canal that leads to nerve compression; can cause leg pain with certain activities or postures

When is imaging needed for LBP?

A good history and physical exam are generally all your provider needs to determine the cause of LBP. X-rays and MRIs are often not necessary, unless your provider suspects something more serious might be going on or your symptoms do not improve in a few weeks.

Let your provider know if you have any of the following:

- Loss of strength or sensation in your legs
- Loss of bladder or bowel control
- Unintentional weight loss of 10 pounds or more in the past 6 months
- Cancer
- Osteoporosis
- Fever greater than 101°F
- Intravenous drug use
- Corticosteroid use
- Significant injury or trauma

How is LBP treated?

SELF-CARE

Cold compresses (apply heat later)
Light exercise and stretching
Avoid prolonged bed rest

MEDICINE (ask your provider about potential side effects)

Acetaminophen (Tylenol)
Ibuprofen (Advil)
Naproxen (Aleve)
Muscle relaxants
Spinal injections

OTHER

Physical therapy
Surgery (rarely)

How to prevent LBP:

Maintain a healthy weight
Practice good posture
Lift with your legs, not your back
Stretch before exercising
Don't smoke