Treating lower-back pain
How much bed rest is too much?

Back pain is one of the most common reasons why people visit the doctor. The good news is that the pain often goes away on its own, and people usually recover in a week or two.

Many people want to stay in bed when their back hurts. For many years, getting bed rest was the normal advice. But studies show that staying in bed longer than 48 hours won’t help. Here’s why:

**Staying in bed won’t help you get better faster.** If you’re in terrible pain, lying down for a day or two can help ease pain and reduce the load on your spine. But research suggests that if you find comfortable positions and move around sometimes, you may not need bed rest at all.

Research shows that:
- Lying down longer than two days doesn’t help.
- Many people recover just as quickly without any bed rest.
- The sooner you start physical therapy or return to activities such as walking, the faster you are likely to recover.
Longer bed rest can lead to slower recovery. Staying in bed over 48 hours can make you stiff and increase pain. When you don’t move and bend, you lose muscle strength and flexibility. With bed rest, you lose about 1 percent of your muscle strength each day. And you can lose 20 to 30 percent in a week. Then, when you start physical therapy and return to activity, it is harder. When you become less strong and flexible, your recovery also takes longer.

Longer bed rest has costs. You may need more physical therapy after a long bed rest. A 15-minute physical therapy session costs around $60, depending on your insurance and where you live. And most sessions last 60 minutes, so the cost is higher. Some insurance plans only cover a limited number of sessions, so you may have to pay out-of-pocket. Also, you may miss more work if your recovery takes longer.

Who needs over 48 hours of bed rest? The only people who might need longer bed rest are people with unstable fractures. They need to remain in bed until a brace is fitted.

What can I do for the pain? Most people with lower-back pain should apply heat or ice. Some people can get pain relief from an anti-inflammatory medicine such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB, and generic) or naproxen (Aleve and generic).

When should I see a doctor? You should see your doctor right away if:
• You have severe back pain that lasts longer than 24–48 hours.
• You have back pain and fever.
• You have back pain with numbness, pain, or weakness in a leg or foot.

Referral to a specialist may be helpful in these cases.

Advice from Consumer Reports

Treat or prevent back pain with physical therapy and exercise

If you have an attack of lower-back pain, physical therapy can help. It uses gentle techniques to help you feel better:
• Heat or ice
• Ultrasound
• Manipulation (massage and movement)

Try to do active exercises, like walking or water aerobics. Exercise is the best way to relieve lower-backed pain and prevent future attacks. In fact, exercise was the top-rated method for back-pain relief in a survey of more than 14,000 Consumer Reports subscribers.

Check with your doctor before starting an exercise program. Here are some tips:

Work with a fitness professional. It may help to work with a physical therapist, who can explain which activities are right for you. A personal trainer, yoga instructor, or another expert can guide you through the activities.

Choose exercises you enjoy. Many activities can help prevent and relieve back pain. Try to include activities that make your abdominal muscles strong. Studies show that these activities help relieve back pain:
• Lifting light weights
• Yoga
• Walking and using a treadmill
• Water aerobics

Don’t cause more pain. Avoid exercises that stress the lower back, like sit-ups with straight legs, leg lifts while lying on your back, and shoulder presses or bicep curls while standing.

Join an exercise program for people with chronic back pain. It might be easier to stick with exercise if you don’t “go it alone.”