

Choosing Wisely[®]

An initiative of the ABIM Foundation



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. However, newer data have shown that there is little to no role for bed rest in the treatment of low back pain. Here's why:

Staying in bed won't help you get better faster.

If you're in terrible pain, bed rest may *not* actually ease the pain, but increase it. Research suggests that if you find comfortable positions and move around sometimes, you may not need bed rest at all.

Research shows that:

- More than 48 hours of bed rest may actually increase pain, by increasing the stiffness of the spine and the muscles.
- 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.



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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 even 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. 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 over-the-counter anti-inflammatory medicine such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB, and generic) or naproxen (Aleve and generic). Don't take more than the recommended amount.

When should I see a doctor?

You should see your doctor right away if:

- You have severe back pain that lasts longer than 24 to 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.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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