

Your Journey with Low Back Pain



For more information scan this QR code or go to myhealth.alberta.ca/low-back-pain-pathway

Low back pain is very common and most often resolves within a short period of time or with conservative treatment. In some cases back pain can last longer or be more severe which might need more help to treat.

You are the most important part of your healthcare team. This guide will help you to know what to expect as you work with your healthcare team to manage and treat low back pain. If you have any questions along the way, please ask your team. Click on the page numbers in blue if you want more information about the step in your journey.

Before your appointment ([page 4](#))

- Write down how you feel and your questions, symptoms, and concerns.
- Consider bringing a family member or friend to support you.



Visit your healthcare provider ([page 5](#))

- Share all of your symptoms, and concerns. Your health includes physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, and social elements.
- To better manage your health condition, your healthcare provider needs to hear from you and understand who you are and what matters to you.



Get your tests ([page 7](#))

- In most cases, diagnostic imaging (such as xrays or MRI's) are not helpful in treating your back pain.
- Your healthcare provider may arrange other tests if planning for a specific treatment.



Review your test results ([page 7](#))

- You may find some of your test results on MyHealth Records or MyAHS Connect (myhealth.alberta.ca/myhealthrecords).
- Talk with your healthcare provider so you know what your test results mean and how they will help your team and you decide what to do next.



Review your treatment & management options ([page 8](#))

- Your healthcare provider will help you better understand your condition and give you important strategies to guide your recovery.
- In most cases, education, exercise, and lifestyle changes should be tried as the first approach to care.
- More severe pain can require additional strategies to help you manage your symptoms.
- Decide what will work best for you.
- Your healthcare provider may need advice from a specialist or may suggest you see another doctor (referral).



Talk with your healthcare provider about a referral ([page 9](#))

- You may need a referral based on your specific needs.
- Ask who you are being sent to and what they do.
- Ask how long it will take to be seen and what you should do if you don't hear back.



Start your treatment & watch your symptoms ([page 10](#))

- Take an active role in your treatment.
- Write down any new symptoms.



Keep taking care of yourself ([page 11](#))

- Keep taking care of your overall health.
- Look for other healthy lifestyle resources and supports.



Whole-person health ([page 2](#))

Important Tips:

Need a family doctor?

ahs.ca/findadoctor

Need a translator?

Let your healthcare provider know

Need health advice?

Call Health Link at 811

Need to find programs and services in your community?

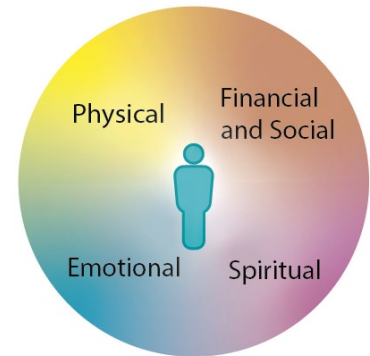
Call 211 or visit ab.211.ca

Whole-person health

The whole-person health approach will help you and your healthcare team better manage your health condition. It is drawn from the teachings of the medicine wheel.

Whole-person health means thinking about all parts of your health and wellness: physical, financial and social, spiritual, and emotional. All of these parts are connected and influence each other. It's important to be aware of your personal needs in each part and to share that information with your healthcare team.

- **Physical:** your specific health conditions and how well your body works
- **Financial and Social:** your ability to meet your housing, transportation, food, and health needs, feeling supported to manage your daily life, and having meaningful relationships
- **Spiritual:** your beliefs, sense of connection, and purpose
- **Emotional:** how you think, feel, and cope with life events



Whole-person health

Whole-person health also reminds us that we are all connected and work together: you, your support systems, and your healthcare providers. Your healthcare providers could be your doctor, nurse practitioner, or a team that comes together with you to plan and organize your care.

Your healthcare provider needs to understand who you are and what matters to you. This helps to build trust. But it can be hard to know what to share or what to say. Try starting by asking yourself:

“What are the things in my life that are important to me?”

“What are the things in my life that may be affecting my health and well-being?”



Continued on next page.

Bringing forward what matters to you is important. Here are some examples of things you may want to talk about with your healthcare provider:



Physical

“My symptoms are making it hard for me to do my job.”

“Because of my pain and how hard it is for me to move around, it’s hard to take care of myself.”

Financial and Social

“I’m worried I won’t be able to get to all of my appointments.”

“I need my daughter with me as a translator.”

“I’m not sure how I will pay for my medications this month.”

Emotional

“I’m lonely and have no one to talk to.”

“I have a lot of stress and I’m not sure how to manage it.”

“Ever since my friend died, I’ve been struggling with my feelings.”

Spiritual

“It’s important that I follow traditional healing practices.”

“How can I include my culture’s foods and family recipes in my nutrition plan?”

“It’s important that my religious practice of fasting is respected and brought into my care.”

What is low back pain?

[Low back pain](#) can have many causes and most often improves without surgery. Most often, back pain can be from muscle, ligament, or nerve injuries, however, in rare cases back pain can be caused by more serious conditions.

Back pain can be described as acute (new) or as chronic (long term). It can also be felt directly in your back, in your leg or be present in both.

Before your appointment

Here are a few tips to help you get ready for your appointment with your healthcare provider:

- Consider using a symptom tracker to write down important information to share with your healthcare team about your symptom(s).
- A symptom tracker can help you remember what symptom(s) you're feeling, when it started, how often it happens, and what makes it better or worse.
- Write down a list of your questions and concerns. When you're done, read your list and mark the most important things.
- Make a list of the prescription and non-prescription (over the counter) medicines you use, including any vitamins, supplements, ointments, herbs, and muscle stimulators.
- Ask someone you trust to go with you to your appointment. They can help you ask questions, write down instructions, and remember explanations.



Helpful tools and resources

To get the most out of your visit, plan to write notes during the visit or see the Alberta Health Services **My Care Conversations app** (ahs.ca/careapp) website for more information about recording your conversation with your healthcare provider.

Use a symptom tracker (HQCA): hqca.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/HQCA-Symptom-Tracker-March-23-2022.pdf



Healthcare provider's assessment for mechanical lower back pain:

- **Why do I need this assessment?:** This helps your healthcare provider determine what is causing the pain. How your pain is felt and the type of activities that impact your pain can help your healthcare provider narrow down the cause.
- **What should I expect?:** Your healthcare provider will ask you questions about your pain level and what makes the pain better or worse. They will also ask you to perform certain tests such as range of movement and strength to help them understand how to best treat your back pain. They may also feel areas in your lower back.

What should I watch for (symptoms of concern)?

Be aware of:

- When and where you are feeling your pain. For example: Is there a specific movement that brings on the pain? Where on your body do you feel it?
- Changes in pain, sensation, strength, or your ability to move.
- Additionally, any changes in your ability to walk, night sweats, unexplained weight loss, or constant pain that doesn't improve in any way.

Contact your healthcare team if you experience:

- Sharp, stabbing pain that prevents movement.
- Change of sensation in your hips and bum area or accidents with bowel or bladder function, or difficulty going to the washroom.
- Pain that is constant and not related to activity levels, or constant pain that is there with night sweating or unexplained weight loss.

What should I share with my healthcare provider?

- What impact the health condition or issue is having on things that are important to you, like your job, hobbies and interests, and relationships?
- What has worked for you in the past to manage your current condition?
- What types of things help you work better with your healthcare team and what you expect and need from the relationship with your healthcare provider?
- There are lots of things in your life that can impact your ability to manage your health, like:
 - Problems with money, housing, and access to transportation
 - Alcohol or drug use
 - Not enough support or help
 - Childhood experiences

It's important to talk about these things with your healthcare provider because they all play a role in your health and well-being.

You are the most important part of your healthcare team.

If you don't understand what your healthcare team is telling you, let them know right away. Be open and honest. You might say:

"This is new to me. Could you please explain it slowly, using language that is easier to understand?"

"It sounded like you said that I should... Did I understand that correctly?"

"Can you show me a picture or model to help me understand?"



Helpful tools and resources

- Making the most of your appointment: myhealth.alberta.ca/health/pages/conditions.aspx?Hwid=hw226888
- Working with your healthcare team: hqca.ca/for-patients-and-families/working-with-your-healthcare-team



Get your tests

Diagnostic imaging tests (such as x-rays, CT scans, MRI) are only required if your healthcare provider may suspect or needs to rule out other health concerns. Getting these tests routinely for the majority of patients does not change the recommended treatment and can even delay recovery or negatively impact the chances of returning to previous activity.

Diagnostic imaging and further investigations may be needed by your healthcare provider for planning a specific treatment.



Review your test results

It is important to know what your test results are and what they mean for you. Take time to discuss your results with your healthcare provider.

Medical terms can be hard to understand. And even common words like “positive” or “negative” might mean something different for medical tests. Ask your healthcare provider for explanations and examples to make sure you fully understand.

Should you review your results online, make a note of questions you may have before going to see your healthcare provider.

You might ask:

“What does this mean for me?”

“Is there a current concern? If so, what is it?”



Helpful tools and resources

You may find some of your results and health information using secure online tools:

MyHealth Records

See your lab results, immunizations, and some other results with a MyHealth Records account. Sign up at myhealth.alberta.ca/myhealthrecords.

MyAHS Connect

See your health information, manage your Alberta Health Services appointments, and interact directly with some members of your healthcare team. Ask your healthcare provider how to access your MyAHS Connect account. Learn more at ahs.ca/myahsconnect.



Back pain often improves on its own, but there are also things you can do to help speed up your recovery. Trying to stay active and getting back to normal daily activities as soon as possible is important. Try and be aware of your posture, especially when doing things like lifting, reaching, twisting. You may need to adjust or avoid certain activities that consistently cause pain.

Specific [exercises](#) can also be useful depending on what type of low back pain you are experiencing. Your healthcare provider may refer you to see a physiotherapist and guide you on which exercises to begin with.

Medical treatment options:

The first treatment options that should be discussed are education to ensure that you understand your condition as well as strategies and exercises that you can do to help speed up recovery. Your healthcare provider can discuss pain-relief medication options with you if the pain is interfering with your daily activities.

Other treatment options:

In some cases, additional treatment options might be considered. These include:

- Multidisciplinary services that offer active therapy and or acupuncture.
- Try to [reduce stress](#) by routinely taking 10-15 minutes per day to sit quietly and breathe deeply.
- Try to avoid long periods without movement, for example standing, sitting, or lying down for too long at a time.
- If you are unable to walk due to your back pain, talk to your healthcare provider about mobility aids that might help.

Surgical and specialist consults in carefully selected patients may be appropriate to consider injection therapies.

Asking the following questions can help you make an informed decision about your different options and decide what will work best for you:

“What are the advantages and disadvantages of each option?”

“Can I use any of these options together?”

“How will each option make me feel? Will it have side effects?”

“What results can I expect?”





Talk with your healthcare provider about a referral

Your healthcare provider may refer you to a community-based or home rehabilitation program. The program should focus on exercise and movement and teach you how to manage your condition at home.

- Depending on how long you have been dealing with your back pain and the nature of how it is impacting your life, a multidisciplinary chronic pain program might be appropriate in situations where progress is not being seen even with an active treatment program. This may include community-based cognitive behavioral therapy.
- In carefully considered cases, a referral for spinal injections might be made.
- You may be referred to a spine surgeon or a sports medicine doctor. The role of these specialists is to provide advice on how to manage your condition in carefully considered cases that need specialist guidance. A spine surgeon would also be the one to perform [surgery](#) if it were necessary.
- Ask your healthcare provider about when you should be contacted by the specialist. If you are not contacted by that time, please follow up with your healthcare provider.

Your specialist will meet with you to discuss your health concerns and look at your test results. The specialist may diagnose your concern, order more tests, or discuss treatment and management options with you.

You can find out more about the referral criteria for a specialist by asking your healthcare provider.



Helpful tools and resources

To learn about how to prepare for your specialist appointment, visit ahs.ca/qure.



Start your treatment & watch your symptoms

As you try the treatment options you chose, remember that if something doesn't work the way you thought it would, think about other options and connect with your healthcare provider to find a treatment that will work for you.

Remember:

- Watch for any significant changes in your pain levels. If this occurs, try to note down if anything triggered the change and if anything helps you feel better.
- If your pain significantly worsens or becomes constantly severe in how it feels, contact your healthcare provider straight away.
- Additionally, if you have constant pain no matter what you are doing, and you have other symptoms such as unexplained weight loss, contact your healthcare provider.

Typically, you will follow up with your healthcare provider in 6 to 12 weeks. But you may need to follow up sooner depending on your symptoms.

- Contact your healthcare provider or go to the nearest emergency department right away if you have:
 - Changes to your bladder or bowel control.
 - Changes in feeling or numbness in your perineal area (area between your genitals and anus).
 - Numbness or weakness in your legs.

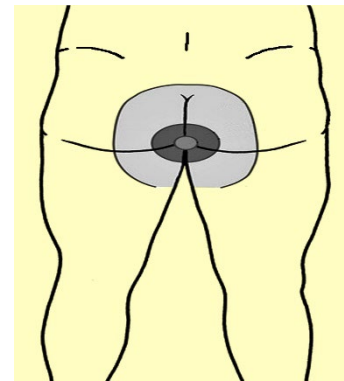


Figure 1 showing perineal area

Watching your symptoms is important. Call your healthcare provider or Health Link at 811 if you have any concerns. You might feel like you don't want to bother your healthcare team, but no detail is too small to share. If it matters to you, it will matter to your healthcare team.

You can clarify with your healthcare team what to expect in terms of follow-up communication. Call your healthcare team whenever you:

- Have questions
- Notice your symptoms getting worse
- Have problems with your medicine
- Haven't gotten test results or heard back about an appointment in the time you had agreed to



Helpful tools and resources

If you can't reach your healthcare provider and need health advice or information, call Health Link anytime, day or night, by dialing **811**.



Keep taking care of yourself

Making changes to your lifestyle and eating habits can be difficult, but your healthcare provider can tell you more about resources available to you for:

- Quitting smoking
- Healthy eating
- Safe exercise

Learn more about [taking care of yourself to prevent low back pain \(video\)](#). Working with your healthcare provider will help you better understand the condition and allow you to make a plan together on how best to manage it.



Helpful tools and resources

Find resources and services in your community:

211 helps Albertans find the right resource or service for whatever issue they need help with, at the right time. 211 is available anytime, day or night, by phone, text, and online chat. It is confidential and available in over 170 languages over the phone. To contact 211:

- Call 211
- Text INFO to 211
- Visit ab.211.ca

Workshops, classes, and services from the **Alberta Healthy Living Program** can help you to improve your health and quality of life with a chronic condition: ahs.ca/ahlp

Chronic Disease Management support: ahs.ca/cdm

Health Information & Tools: myhealth.alberta.ca/Pages/HealthInfoToolsDefault.aspx



Resources

There's lots of information out there, and it can be confusing to know what information is accurate and true. Here are some great resources that may be helpful for you.

- The Rehabilitation Advice Line (1-833-379-0563) - This is a telephone service open Monday to Friday to all Albertans, providing rehabilitation advice and general health information for Albertans of any age.

Get help now:

- Emergency: Call 911
- Health Link: Call 811

Mental health, addiction, and crisis support:

- [Addiction Helpline](tel:1-866-332-2322): 1-866-332-2322
- [Mental Health Helpline](tel:1-877-303-2642): 1-877-303-2642
- Crisis Text Line: Text CONNECT to 741741
- Crisis Services Canada: 988, or visit talksuicide.ca

Helpful tip

If you can't print this resource at home, ask a family member, friend, or your healthcare provider to print it for you. You can also use a computer and printer at your local library.

Community and social supports:

- Alberta 211: 211, or visit ab.211.ca
- Family Violence Info Line: 310-1818, or visit alberta.ca/family-violence-find-supports.aspx
- Income Support: 1-866-644-5135, or visit alberta.ca/income-support.aspx

Alberta Health Services programs:

- Home Care: ahs.ca/homecare
- Find a Dietitian: ahs.ca/nutrition
- Spiritual Care Services: ahs.ca/spiritualcare

Primary care (family doctors):

- Find a doctor: ahs.ca/findadoctor
- Virtual care guide: ahs.ca/virtualhealth

Patient concerns and feedback:

- Office of Alberta Health Advocates: alberta.ca/office-of-alberta-health-advocates.aspx
- Alberta Health Services Patient Relations: 1-855-550-2555, or visit ahs.ca/patientfeedback

Important phone numbers

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Notes

Use this space to take notes.

About this Pathway

The AHS Provincial Pathways Unit co- developed this patient pathway in partnership with:

- Patient and Family Advisers
- Primary Care Providers
- Orthopedic Surgeons
- Alberta Bone and Joint Health Institute
- Bone & Joint Health Strategic Clinical Network, AHS

It is current as of February 2024.

Authors & Conflict of Interest Declaration

This pathway was reviewed and revised by Musculoskeletal Clinical Patient Pathway Working group. Participant names available upon request.

Pathway Review Process

Primary care pathways undergo scheduled review every two years, or earlier if there is a clinically significant change in knowledge or practice. The next scheduled review is January 2025. However, we welcome feedback at any time. Please email comments to albertapathways@ahs.ca.

Copyright Information

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial-Share Alike 4.0 International license. You are free to copy, distribute, and adapt the work for non-commercial purposes, as long as you attribute the work to Alberta Health Services and abide by the other license terms. If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same, similar, or compatible license. The license does not apply to content for which the Alberta Health Services is not the copyright owner.

Disclaimer

This pathway represents evidence-based best practice but does not override the individual responsibility of healthcare professionals to make decisions appropriate to their patients using their own clinical judgment given their patients' specific clinical conditions, in consultation with patients/alternate decision makers. The pathway is not a substitute for clinical judgment or advice of a qualified healthcare professional. It is expected that all users will seek advice of other appropriately qualified and regulated healthcare providers with any issues transcending their specific knowledge, scope of regulated practice or professional competence.