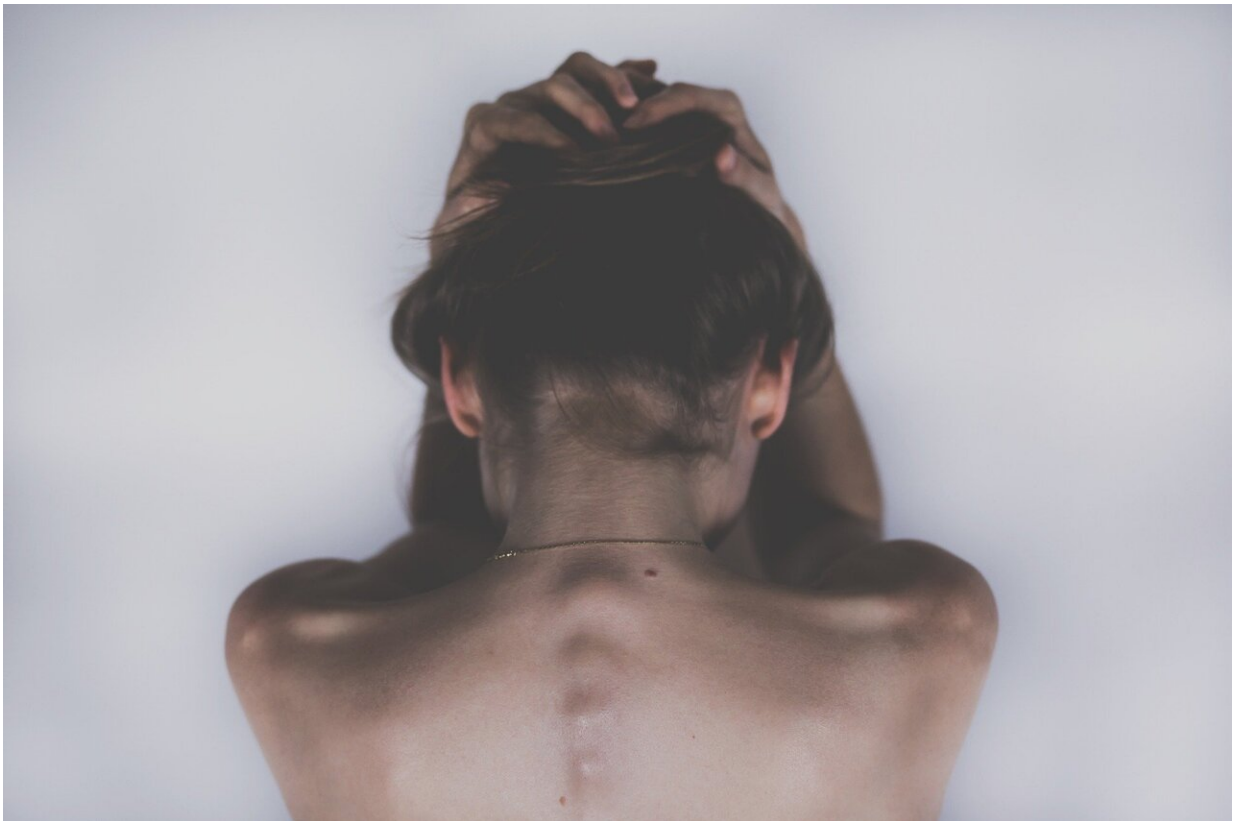


# Back and neck pain treatments range from self-care to surgery; prevention is key

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When back or neck pain strikes, normal activity is disrupted. Seeking relief for back or neck pain is one of the most common reasons people go to their health care provider or miss work.

"The spinal column of the back and neck is made up of many joints, and each of those joints can degenerate and cause [pain](#)," says Mohamad Bydon, M.D., a Mayo Clinic neurosurgeon and editor of "Back and Neck Health: Mayo Clinic Guide to Treating and Preventing Back and Neck Pain."

Causes of back and neck can range from heredity to the result of a physically demanding job to an accident or disease. While most back and neck pain resolves on its own, it's important not to ignore persistent pain.

"Pain is the body's way of warning you that something is wrong," Dr. Bydon says.

If back and neck pain symptoms do not resolve in three to four weeks, or if you experience new and worsening symptoms, such as numbness, tingling or weakness in an arm, hand, leg or foot, Dr. Bydon recommends seeing a [health care provider](#).

Medical care is also advised if:

- Your pain follows a traumatic event such as car accident or fall.
- Your pain is severe.
- Your pain is accompanied by a fever of 100.4 F or higher.
- You have loss of strength in an arm or leg.
- You cannot control your bowels or bladder.
- You have a headache, tingling or numbness with neck pain.

Identifying back and neck problems with an X-ray, MRI or other tests can help pinpoint effective treatments ranging from self-care to surgery.

"The good news is that most cases of back and neck pain can be managed at home," Dr. Bydon says. "When [self-care](#) is not sufficient,

something can be done to help—usually starting with nonsurgical measures."

## Relieving pain

These options can be explored to relieve pain:

- **Self-care:** Hot or cold compresses or massage may offer relief. Gentle stretches and [light exercise](#) may loosen tight muscles. Over-the-counter pain medicine may help control pain, but be careful to take these medications only in the recommended dose.
- **Physical therapy:** A physical therapist can offer specific exercises aimed to lessen pain, resume activity, and improve strength and posture.
- **Nonsurgical interventions:** From acupuncture, chiropractic care and injections to nerve stimulation and prescriptions, a wide range of interventions can address back and neck pain.

"With guidance from your doctor, you may be able to take advantage of one or more of these treatments and get back to normal activities," Dr. Bydon says.

If these options do not work, surgery may be needed.

## Considering surgery

"Surgery typically is the treatment of last resort for back and neck pain," Dr. Bydon says. Surgery may not eliminate all your pain, and it does not cure diseases such as arthritis that can cause age-related wear and tear of the spinal bones, called vertebrae, and of the spinal disks that act as shock absorbers between each vertebra.

Surgery may help when nerves or the spinal cord itself become compressed from degenerative changes in the spine. Your surgeon may remove bone, damaged disk tissue or both. Fusion surgery permanently connects two or more vertebrae, eliminating painful movement between the vertebrae. Spinal tumors or deformities also may warrant surgery.

Technological advancements, such as image-guided or robot-guided surgery, continue to improve spinal [surgery](#) outcomes for patients.

All surgeries have potential problems that can range from bleeding and infection to, rarely, catastrophic complications. "Your surgeon should have a frank and open discussion with you about your risk of complications based on your health history," Dr. Bydon says. Seeking a [second opinion](#) can give you extra confidence that you are choosing the surgeon and the approach that's best for you.

## **Healthy habits to prevent pain**

To prevent back and neck pain, think prevention.

Regular exercise strengthens the muscles, joints and bones that support the back and neck. Exercise also helps maintain a healthy weight, which places less stress on your back and [neck](#). Start physical activity slowly.

"The best activity is something you like and will do—walking, dancing, yoga, swimming, bicycling, whatever appeals to you," Dr. Bydon says.

Try to get at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity most days of the week.

Good posture is important, too. Whether standing, sitting or lifting, poor posture can lead to weak, tight muscles and overstretched ligaments that place additional stress on your spine. Avoid slouching.

"Healthy habits, including good sleep and relaxation techniques, make a big difference in overall health. They can prevent serious problems, such as back or [neck pain](#), or make recovery from such a condition easier," Dr. Bydon says.

Provided by Mayo Clinic

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