

Myths

Heat is better than cold

Heat has been shown to be effective in giving short term relief of back pain. Cold packs or ice packs can also be used for back pain although there is less evidence of their effectiveness. The common advice used to be that ice should be used initially for acute injuries and heat for more chronic pain. This is because ice can help reduce swelling and spasm that come with acute injuries. Some people feel that their muscle tension is reduced with heat, so we recommend using heat or ice for back pain, whichever one works better. People with circulatory problems or decreased sensation on the skin should be careful with heat because it can cause burns. Even mild heat can cause a burn if left on for too long, so don't go to sleep with a heating pad and leave it on all night long.

“I just bent over and my back went out ” Unless you bent over to pick up a 50 lb box, it is unlikely that one movement caused a back injury. More likely, years of repetitive stresses, lack of exercise and degenerative changes to your spine left you vulnerable to the injury. Remember the old saying “the straw that broke the camel's back”? You bend over tens of thousands of times in your life before you hit your limit and cause actual pain.

“If I injured my back, why does my leg hurt?” Pain doesn't always occur in the same place as the injury. The nerves that carry pain signals end up in the spinal cord, but travel down to both arms and legs. An injury to the neck or cervical spine can produce pain in the arm and an injury to the lower back or lumbar spine can produce pain in the leg.

“I am in too much pain to exercise” When your back hurts all you want to do is lay down and not move at all. Exercise and movement can help aid the healing process and is important in your recovery. Actually more than 2 days of bedrest can actually make you worse. Your body will become de-conditioned, weaker and stiffer, and this can prolong your back pain. Even small movements and short periods of exercise or walking can be helpful.