

Low Back Osteoarthritis

What You Need to Know

What Is Low Back Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common form of arthritis and occurs when the protective cartilage that cushions the ends of bones gradually wears down over time. In the lower back, this typically affects the small joints between the vertebrae called the facet joints, as well as the intervertebral discs. As the cartilage breaks down, bones can begin to rub against each other, the body may develop bone spurs, and the surrounding soft tissues can become inflamed — all of which contribute to pain and stiffness.

Low back OA is extremely common and is a normal part of aging for many people. However, having OA on an X-ray or MRI does not necessarily mean you will have significant pain — many people with visible arthritis have little to no symptoms, and many people with significant pain have minimal arthritis. The degree of pain is influenced by muscle strength, posture, activity level, and overall health just as much as by the arthritis itself.

What Does It Feel Like?

Low back osteoarthritis tends to cause:

- A dull, deep aching pain in the lower back that is often worse in the morning and after inactivity
- Stiffness that eases with gentle movement but worsens with prolonged activity
- Pain that increases with standing, walking, or twisting
- A grinding or catching sensation with certain movements
- Occasional flare-ups of more intense pain that can last days to weeks
- Stiffness after sitting for long periods
- In some cases, pain that radiates into the buttocks or thighs (but rarely below the knee)

What Makes It Worse?

- Extended standing or walking
- Bending backward (extension) — which compresses the facet joints

- Sitting or lying in one position for too long
- Cold or damp weather
- Overexertion or heavy lifting
- Being overweight, which increases load on the spinal joints

How Did This Happen?

Osteoarthritis develops gradually and is influenced by a combination of factors:

- Age — cartilage naturally degenerates over time
- Prior injuries to the spine
- Repetitive strain from work or physical activity
- Genetics and family history of arthritis
- Being overweight, which puts extra stress on the spinal joints
- A history of poor posture or muscle weakness around the spine

When Should I Be Concerned?

See a healthcare provider promptly if you experience:

- New numbness, tingling, or weakness in your legs
- Loss of bladder or bowel control
- Unexplained weight loss, fever, or night pain that wakes you from sleep
- Pain that is significantly worse than usual or does not respond to your normal management strategies

The Good News

Osteoarthritis of the lower back is very manageable. Physical therapy is one of the most effective treatments available — strengthening the muscles that support the spine reduces load on the arthritic joints and can dramatically decrease pain and improve daily function. You do not need to stop being active. In fact, movement is medicine for OA.

Physical therapy, exercise, and staying active can dramatically reduce pain — because **movement is medicine** for osteoarthritis.

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