



# VA/DoD CLINICAL PRACTICE GUIDELINE FOR THE DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF LOW BACK PAIN

Department of Veterans Affairs

Department of Defense

## Patient Summary

### I. What is Low Back Pain?

- Low back pain is a symptom, not a disease. Low back pain is pain located in the back itself. However, you may also have symptoms in the abdomen, pelvis, buttocks, legs, and feet.
- Physical and psychosocial factors, such as how you think and feel, can influence how low back pain affects you. They can affect your quality of life and functioning.
- Low back pain can be defined as acute, subacute, or chronic.
  - ◆ Acute low back pain is a new episode of low back pain that usually lasts up to one month. It may affect you enough that you seek medical attention for it.
  - ◆ Subacute low back pain is when your low back pain lasts longer than one month but less than three months.
  - ◆ Chronic low back pain is when your low back pain lasts for three months or longer. Chronic low back pain can affect all aspects of your life. It may make it hard for you to do physical activities, sleep, or rest. It may also make you more stressed.

### II. What Causes Low Back Pain?

Sometimes it is easy to find the cause of your low back pain. For example, there may have been an injury that occurred right before the pain started. More commonly, the cause of your back pain is unclear.

Multiple factors can contribute to your low back pain. These factors could include musculoskeletal conditions such as arthritis. They could also include psychological conditions such as depression or anxiety. Most people with low back pain do not require imaging or medical tests, as these may not completely explain the cause of or the intensity of your low back pain.

Rarely, low back pain can be associated with serious underlying diseases or conditions. These can include infection, cauda equina syndrome, fracture, or cancer. Your healthcare provider can help determine whether your pain is caused by a serious underlying condition.

Since low back pain is a symptom, your healthcare provider may recommend starting treatment to lessen its impact on your life. They may recommend treatment even if the cause of your low back pain is unclear.

### III. Goals for Low Back Pain Treatment

You should work with your healthcare provider to set realistic goals as a part of your treatment plan. In general, your goals should focus on how to lessen the impact of your low back pain and improve your quality of life.

Goals of Low Back Pain Treatment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Restore your physical function (ability to move, exercise, and take part in life activities)</li><li>• Restore your emotional function (happiness and satisfaction with life)</li><li>• Restore your social function (activities and connections with others)</li><li>• Improve your quality of life</li><li>• Reconnect with what is important to you</li><li>• Improve your ability to manage your pain and return to a healthy lifestyle</li><li>• Gain a better understanding of your pain</li><li>• Take care of other health issues that co-exist with chronic pain (for example, muscle weakness, poor sleep, poor diet)</li></ul>

### IV. Treatment Options for Low Back Pain

Treatments for low back pain include self-care, non-drug and non-invasive therapies, drug therapies, invasive procedure, and surgery. The VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for Diagnosis and Treatment of Low Back Pain includes details on most of these conditions. However, surgery is out of its scope.

#### A. Self-care

Self-management refers to everything you can do on your own to manage your health problems and live your life as fully as possible. You have to make many decisions every day about exercising, managing stress, taking medications, and dealing with life problems. You also have to decide how these will affect your pain, suffering, and disability. Most importantly, you have to become active in your own management efforts. Treatment of pain requires an all-inclusive approach. You can learn more about individualized self-care education through sources such as the [VA/DoD LBP Diagnosis and Treatment Patient Booklet](#).

#### B. Non-drug and Non-invasive Therapies

Many non-drug and non-invasive therapies have helped people reduce their pain and improve their quality of life. These types of treatments have also helped people avoid increasing their risk of side effects. Some side effects of drugs are serious. They can include addiction, serious injury, or death. Behavioral therapies can help people reduce their pain and learn to react to pain in ways that help them function better. For chronic low back pain, exercise programs prescribed by healthcare providers can help slowly improve physical function and reduce pain sensitivity. Complementary medical treatments are helpful for many people. These can include acupuncture, spinal mobilization therapy, and manipulation therapy. Coordinated programs conducted by a team of healthcare providers that includes

at least one physical treatment and at least one psychological, social, and/or occupational treatment can help improve pain and disability. Work with your healthcare provider to make a treatment plan that includes non-drug and non-invasive therapies. This type of treatment can help you manage your low back pain as part of a management plan that makes sense for you, is doable for you over a long period of time and helps keep you safe.

### **C. Drug Therapies**

Some drug treatments can also help reduce low back pain. Examples of drugs that have been effective in some people with acute low back pain include some anti-inflammatory medications. Drugs that have been effective in some people with chronic low back pain include some anti-inflammatory and antidepressant medications. When taking these medications, follow the directions of your healthcare provider. This can help you lessen your chances of harmful side effects from drug treatments.

### **D. Invasive Procedures**

In some cases, an invasive procedure other than surgery may be helpful. For instance, in some people with chronic low back pain, a lumbar medial branch and/or sacral lateral branch radiofrequency ablation may be helpful to improve pain. Many invasive treatments do not have clear benefits and have some risks. You should work with your provider to determine whether these treatments would work for you. Discuss whether or not they would be better for you than non-invasive treatment options.

### **V. Questions to Ask Your Care Team**

Ask about anything that seems unclear to you. Some examples may include:

- What resources are available at my facility to help manage my pain?
- What treatments other than medications may help my low back pain?
- Should I rest or stay active? What exercises might be helpful for my condition?
- What might make my pain worse that I should avoid doing?
- Is there anything that I could do at home to help manage my pain?

### **VI. You Can Find More Information on Low Back Pain Here:**

- VA/DoD LBP Diagnosis and Treatment Patient Booklet: [https://www.qmo.amedd.army.mil/lbp/Final\\_LBP\\_Booklet.pdf](https://www.qmo.amedd.army.mil/lbp/Final_LBP_Booklet.pdf)
- The Back Pain Information Page from the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases: [https://www.niams.nih.gov/Health\\_Info/Back\\_Pain/default.asp](https://www.niams.nih.gov/Health_Info/Back_Pain/default.asp)