



**BREAKING THE CYCLE:**

# Common Culprits of Back Pain

If you have chronic back pain, you're not alone. Approximately 16 million adults in the US struggle to find relief from a multitude of back injuries. In fact, treatment for chronic back pain costs Americans over \$12 billion each year.

Chronic back pain significantly impacts quality of life. It often leads to missed workdays, lost wages, feelings of sadness and worthlessness, and poor physical health. That's why working with your healthcare provider to get a diagnosis and proper treatment for back pain is essential. Here are some common culprits of chronic back pain.

## **FRACTURED VERTEBRAE**

Your spine is made up of 33 small bones called vertebrae. These bones protect your spinal cord and nerves. When a vertebra is fractured, it can cause a lot of pain—not only from the bone fracture but also if the spinal cord or surrounding nerves are affected. A doctor can order imaging, like x-rays, or an MRI, to diagnosis this painful condition.

Many fractured vertebrae injuries can heal with rest and support from a brace. More serious fractures may require surgical intervention

## **RUPTURED DISC**

Between each of your vertebrae, there's a spinal disc. Spinal discs act as cushions between the small bones called vertebrae that make up your spine. There are two main parts of a spinal disc: the nucleus and the annulus. The nucleus is the soft, jelly-like center, and the annulus is the protective, rubbery exterior.

When the annulus tears and the nucleus start to push through, it's called a ruptured or herniated disc. In addition to back pain, it can also cause pain in other parts of your body if the surrounding nerves are



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affected—but some herniated discs never cause any pain or other symptoms.

Treatment for a ruptured disc usually involves rest, medication for pain and swelling. Physical therapy may also help, and surgery is typically not necessary.

### MUSCLE & LIGAMENT INJURIES

The muscles and ligaments in your back are also vulnerable to injuries. If you twist awkwardly or lift heavy

objects improperly, you can sprain the ligaments or strain the muscles in your back. This can cause sharp, sudden pain at the time of injury, as well as dull or sharp lasting pain after the fact.

Resting, applying heat or ice, and performing strengthening and stretching exercises can help heal muscle and ligament injuries. Consult your healthcare provider to determine the best exercises and stretches for your specific injury.

## BRITTLE BONES, BIGGER INJURIES

From birth until around 30 years old, your bones get stronger as your body makes bone tissue more quickly than it breaks down. According to Mayo Clinic, this process slows down in your 20s, when you reach your “peak bone mass.”

After age 30, your body makes new bone tissue slower than the rate at which it breaks down. This is a completely normal part of aging. However, if your bones break down to the point of becoming weak and brittle, you may have a condition called osteoporosis. Which increases the probability of bone fractures and breaks.

Osteoporosis has a few telltale signs and symptoms:

- Losing height as you age
- Worsening posture
- More easily breakable bones
- Pain in your back from broken or collapsed bones

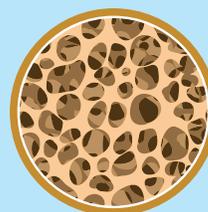
Your risk for osteoporosis increases as you age. Women are at higher risk than men. People of Caucasian and Asian descent are more likely to develop osteoporosis than people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. If there’s a family history of this condition or you have a small body frame, your risk for osteoporosis is also higher. Certain medications, lifestyle choices, and health conditions may increase your risk for osteoporosis, including:

- Long-term use of corticosteroids
- Inadequate calcium consumption
- Eating disorders
- Some weight loss surgeries
- Low estrogen levels
- Excessive alcohol intake
- Tobacco use
- Inactive lifestyle

HEALTHY BONE



OSTEOPOROSIS



SEVERE OSTEOPOROSIS



### PREVENTING OSTEOPOROSIS

If you know that you’re at an increased risk for developing osteoporosis, you don’t have to resign yourself to brittle bones and breaks. You can use these tips to strengthen and protect your bones:

- **Watch your calcium intake.** Consume at least 1,000 mg of calcium every day to strengthen your bones. Women should increase daily calcium to 1,200 mg at age 50, and men at age 70. **Note:** *you can get more calcium in your diet from low-fat milk, fortified orange juice or cereal, dark green leafy veggies, soy products, or by taking a daily supplement.*
- **Boost your vitamin D.** Your body needs vitamin D to absorb calcium. Without it, your body can’t properly use calcium to strengthen your bones. **Note:** *your body may be able to produce vitamin D from sunlight but fortified milk and cereal, salmon, and trout are great dietary sources.*
- **Get moving!** Exercising regularly helps your body build stronger bones and prevent bone loss. **Note:** *weight-bearing, strengthening, and balancing exercises are all beneficial.*

Speak with your physician if you are experiencing back pain or have concerns regarding your risk for osteoporosis. If you do not have a primary care physician (PCP), you may call the Health Advocate number on your BCBSIL member ID card or [log on to Blue Access for Members<sup>SM</sup> \(BAM<sup>SM</sup>\) \[bcbsil.com\]\(http://bcbsil.com\)](#) and use the Provider Finder. This fast, easy-to-use tool improves members’ experience when searching for in-network healthcare providers.



**SOURCES:** [Georgetown.edu](#), [MayoClinic.org](#), [NIAMS.nih.gov](#), [ClevelandClinic.org \(spine anatomy\)](#), [ClevelandClinic.org \(spine fractures\)](#), [MayoClinic.org \(ruptured disc\)](#), [MayoClinic.org \(osteoporosis\)](#)