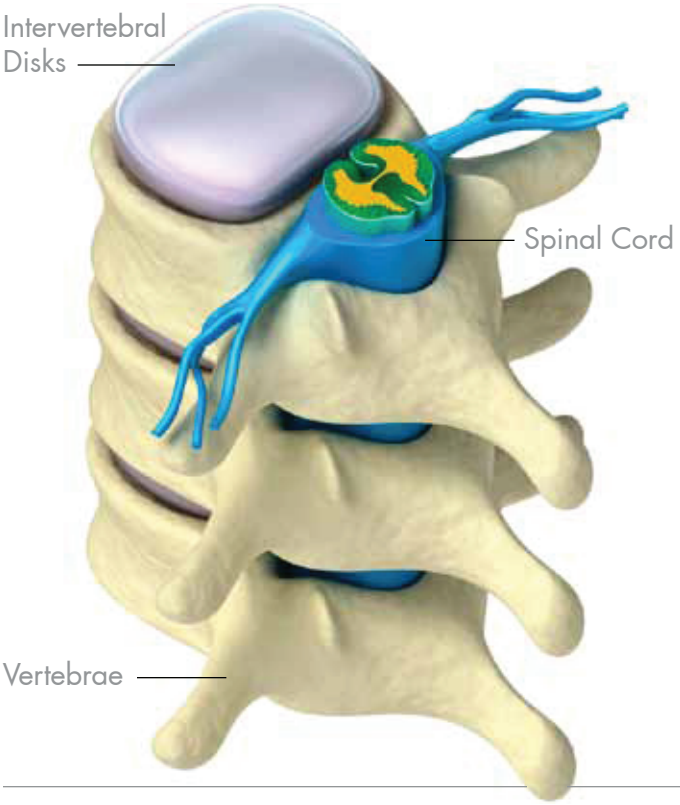
MEMORIAL HERMANN
Surgical Hospital
First Colony

UNDERSTANDING BACK PAIN



KEYS TO PREVENTION

Almost everyone will experience low back pain at some point in their lives. This pain can vary from mild to severe. It can be short-lived or long-lasting. However it happens, low back pain can make many everyday activities difficult to do. Back pain is different from one person to the next. The pain can have a slow onset or come on suddenly. The pain may be intermittent or constant. In most cases, back pain resolves on its own within a few weeks. Understanding your spine and how it works can help you understand why you have low back pain.

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MEMORIAL HERMANN SURGICAL HOSPITAL - FIRST COLONY

UNDERSTANDING THE SPINE

Your spine is made up of small bones, called vertebrae, which are stacked on top of one another. Muscles, ligaments, nerves, and intervertebral disks are additional parts of your spine.

- Vertebrae
  These bones connect to create a canal that protects the spinal cord. The spinal column is made up of three sections: the neck area (cervical), chest area (thoracic), and lower back (lumbar). The lower section of your spine (sacrum and coccyx) is made up of vertebrae that are fused together.

- Spinal Cord and Nerves
  These "electrical cables" travel through the spinal canal carrying messages between your brain and muscles. Nerves branch out from the spinal cord through openings in the vertebrae.

- Muscles and Ligaments
  These provide support and stability for your spine and upper body. Strong ligaments connect your vertebrae and help keep the spinal column in position.

- Facet Joints
  Between vertebrae are small joints that help your spine move.

- Intervertebral Disks
  These disks sit in between the vertebrae. When you walk or run, the disks act as shock absorbers and prevent the vertebrae from bumping against one another. They work with your facet joints to help your spine move, twist and bend. The disks are flat and round, and about a half inch thick. They are made up of two components: annulus fibrosus, the tough, flexible outer ring of the disk that helps connect to the vertebrae; and nucleus pulposus, the soft, jelly-like center of the annulus fibrosus that gives the disk its shock-absorbing capabilities.

CAUSES OF BACK PAIN

There are many causes of low back pain. It sometimes occurs after a specific movement such as lifting or bending.

Getting older also plays a role in many back conditions. Aging causes degenerative changes in the spine. These changes can start in our 30s — or even younger — and can make us prone to back pain, especially if we overdo our activities.

BACK PAIN PREVENTION

It may not be possible to prevent low back pain. We cannot avoid the normal wear and tear on our spines that goes along with aging. But there are things we can do to lessen the impact of low back problems. Having a healthy lifestyle is a good start.

- Exercise
  Combine aerobic exercise, like walking or swimming, with specific exercises to keep the muscles in your back and abdomen strong and flexible.

- Proper Lifting
  Be sure to lift heavy items with your legs, not your back. Do not bend over to pick something up. Keep your back straight and bend at your knees. Keep what you are lifting close to your body.

- Weight
  Maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight puts added stress on your lower back.

- Avoid Smoking
  Both the smoke and the nicotine cause your spine to age faster than normal.

- Proper Posture
  Good posture is important for avoiding future problems. A therapist can teach you how to safely stand, sit, and lift.