

Low Back Pain Exercise Guide

Active forms of back exercises are almost always necessary to help alleviate lower back pain and rehabilitate the spine for long-term health.

Before starting any new exercise program, please be sure to do two important things:

1. Get a diagnosis that identifies the cause of your lower back pain, and;
2. Start your exercise program under the guidance of a qualified health professional to make sure you're doing the right exercises for your condition, and that you're doing them correctly (which is harder than it seems).

Tips for Exercising

While any exercise program you undertake should be customized to you as an individual, here are some general tips to help you get started:

- Do not start exercises for the first time during an episode of acute pain without first consulting a physician.
- Never exercise or stretch if you have not properly warmed up (e.g. 10 minutes or so of low impact aerobic exercise). As a rule of thumb, once you break into a sweat while warming up, your muscles and physiology are ready to begin stretching and exercising.
- If you feel pain while exercising, stop. Do not “push through the pain.” Note the pain or other symptoms and follow up with your physician. These findings can better help your physician diagnose and treat the problem.
- Breathe normally while doing stretching and strengthening exercises.
- In general, work up to doing exercises in sets of 3 to 5 repetitions daily if possible, or at least 4 times a week.
- Make exercise part of your normal routine. Design an exercise regimen that fits with your unique lifestyle. If you need external motivation, work out with a friend or join a class.
- Do not try to do too much too soon. If you have not been exercising regularly you may need to start with shorter exercise sessions and work your way up to a more sustained effort.

For anyone who finds land-based exercises difficult, it may be a good idea to start with exercising in a pool with a water therapy program. The water supports you and provides gentle resistance. Most water therapy programs keep the pool comfortably warm, which you may find comforting.

Examples of Typical Exercises

As a general rule of thumb, a balanced exercise and rehabilitation program for lower back pain will include a combination of stretching, strengthening, and low-impact aerobic exercise.

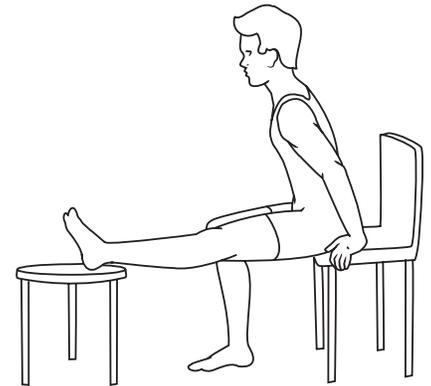
Stretching

When stretching, go into the stretch in a smooth movement and hold for at least 15 to 30 seconds. Stretch to the point of feeling some discomfort in the muscle you're stretching, but not pain.

HAMSTRING STRETCH/SEATED CHAIR STRETCH

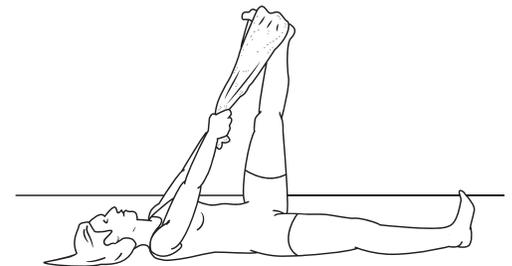
If you have mobility problems or tight hamstrings, you can stretch in a chair.

- While seated, rest one heel on the floor and gently place your other foot on a chair across from you.
- Keep your back straight as you lean forward over the outstretched leg. You should feel the stretch in the back of your thigh.
- Hold the stretch for at least 15 seconds, then lower the leg to the floor and place your other leg on the chair.
- Repeat 3 times per side.



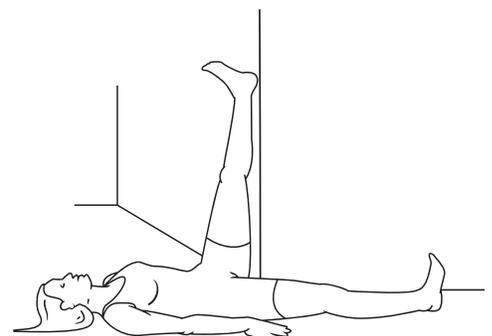
SUPINE HAMSTRING STRETCH/TOWEL HAMSTRING STRETCH

- Lie on the floor with your right leg flat. Keeping your abdominal muscles tight, lift your straight left leg slowly upward.
- If your hamstrings are tight, try wrapping a belt or exercise band around your left instep and hold onto the ends, using it to help you lift your leg.
- When you feel a gentle stretch in the back of the left thigh, hold for at least 15 seconds, then lower the leg to the floor.
- Repeat 3 times for each leg.



WALL HAMSTRING STRETCH

- Lie down on the floor with your legs resting on the floor and your hip next to a doorjamb or wall corner.
- Place the leg nearest the corner on the wall with the knee bent. Slowly straighten the leg against the wall while keeping your hips flat on the floor.
- Hold for 15 to 30 seconds. Repeat 3 times per side.
- Because you're lying down, this exercise can be relaxing even while you're working to stretch the hamstrings.



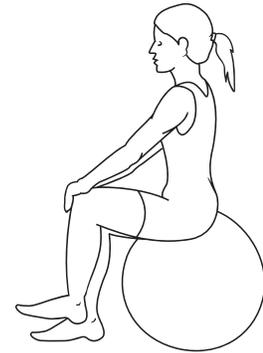
Try to be patient; it may take months of daily stretching to regain your range of motion. The spine and all of its supporting structures were designed to move—limitations in this motion can make your pain worse.

Strengthening

Many back exercises can help strengthen the spinal column and the supporting muscles, ligaments, and tendons. In addition to the back muscles, it is important to strengthen your abdominal muscles, hip muscles, and buttocks. Taken together, these strong core muscles will help support your lower back and alleviate pain.

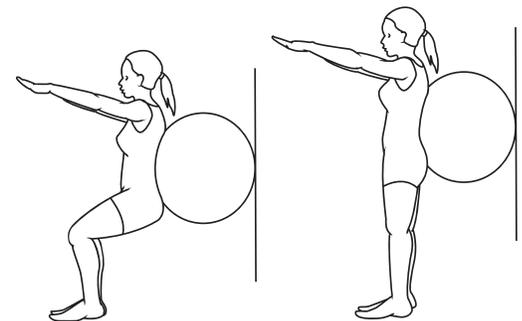
MARCHING ON THE BALL

- While sitting on the exercise ball with your feet in front of you shoulder-width apart and flat on the ground, lift one heel while keeping your toes on the ground. (For a greater challenge, lift your whole foot off the ground.)
- Hold that position for a few seconds and then put that foot back on the ground and switch to the other side. You'll soon notice how much your stomach muscles have to contract to help you lift your feet off the floor.
- Repeat for 10 to 15 minutes.



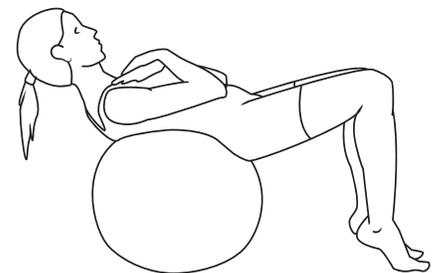
BALL SQUAT

- Stand in front of a wall with your feet shoulder-width apart.
- Place the exercise ball between your lower back and the wall. Lean back against the ball, pressing it against the wall. Keep your hips aligned with your shoulders. Reposition your feet so they are slightly in front of your hips.
- Bend your knees and roll down, moving the ball up your back, then roll back up. Start with small squats and hold for one or two seconds in the down position, then the up position.
- Go slowly and do 10 to 12 repetitions.



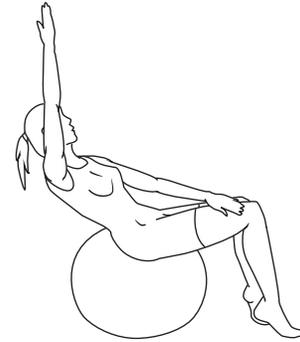
HALF CRUNCH

- Sit on the exercise ball with your feet flat on the floor and your arms crossed over your chest or on your hips.
- Lean back at a 45-degree angle, bending at your hips and raising up on your toes without moving your feet.
- Use your abdominal muscles to pull yourself back up into a sitting position without lifting your feet, rocking forward into a flat-footed position.
- Slowly rock back and forth on the ball 5 times.



OBLIQUE CRUNCH

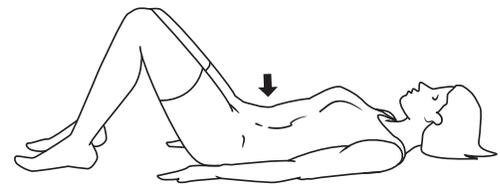
- Sit on the exercise ball with your feet flat on the floor and your arms raised straight overhead.
- Lean back to a 45-degree angle, bending at your hips and raising up on your toes without moving your feet.
- Hold this position and lower one arm at a time slowly toward your opposite knee.
- Repeat 10 times on each side, alternating arms.



PELVIC TILT

This exercise involves a very slight internal movement that isolates and strengthens your core and pelvic floor muscles.

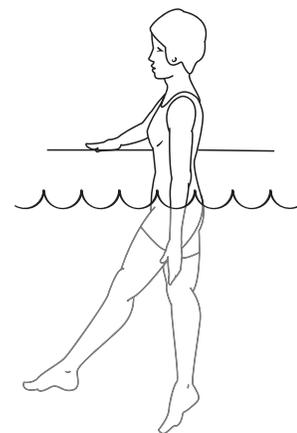
- Lie on the floor with your knees bent, your feet placed on the floor parallel to each other, and your arms at your sides.
- Tighten your lower abdominal muscles, sinking your abdomen downward toward your spine without using your buttocks or leg muscles to help you. Your pelvis will tilt upward slightly during this movement, but it won't leave the floor.
- Hold this position for 5 seconds, then relax your muscles.
- Do 5 to 10 repetitions.



WATER LEG LIFTS

You can do this exercise in a swimming pool in water a little over waist deep.

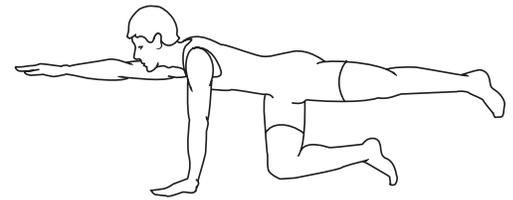
- Stand next to the pool wall, resting one hand on the pool edge for balance.
- Raise one straight leg slowly to the front as far as you can, then lower the leg slowly back down.
- Repeat for 10 to 15 minutes.
- You can also do a variation of this exercise outside of the pool by using a table or counter for balance.



FLOOR-BASED ARM/LEG RAISES

This combination stretch works both the arms and legs while giving an extra challenge to the core.

- Raise your right arm and left leg at the same time.
- Hold position for 5 seconds.
- Slowly lower limbs to the starting position.
- Do 3 to 5 repetitions for each opposite limb pair.



Aerobic Exercise

Aerobic exercise that is relatively gentle on the back includes walking, riding an exercise bike (unless bending forward makes your symptoms worse), and working out on an elliptical trainer or stair machine. Swimming is an excellent choice, as there is almost no impact on the back.

Whatever type of aerobic exercise you choose, the exercise should be vigorous enough to increase your heart rate to the target zone (which is scaled to the age of the patient) and keep it elevated. Elevating the heart rate for at least 20 minutes is needed in order to improve cardiovascular strength, substantially increase your blood circulation, and make noticeable strides in fitness.

Summary

Please consider this exercise guide as informational only. Enlisting the expertise of an appropriately trained and licensed health professional for exercise is highly recommended.

The spine is a complicated structure, and specialists have defined exercise protocols based on the cause of your pain. It's always important to see a physician if the lower back pain lasts for more than a few weeks or if you have any concerning symptoms, as they may signify a serious medical condition.

Exercise done in a controlled, progressive manner is almost always a part of any lower back pain treatment. It is usually done with the collective goals of reducing your pain, preventing or reducing the chances of having another episode of pain, and setting you on a long-term path of improved strength, balance, flexibility, and vigor.

The bottom line is this: Participating in developing and maintaining an active rehabilitation and exercise program for low back pain should help you heal faster and have fewer or no recurrences of back pain.

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