6 TIPS for managing low back pain

Low back pain is one of the top 10 reasons someone visits their doctor.

1. The most common causes of low back pain are muscular or skeletal, such as muscle or ligament strains, and irritation in the muscle tissue or joints of the spine. Minor back injuries can result from awkward physical movements, prolonged standing or other positioning, and multiple small, repetitive motions. Stress can make the pain seem more severe in some patients.

2. Share your personal health history and family history with your doctor to ensure appropriate testing – "red flags," such as recent trauma, history of cancer, weight loss, or loss of feeling/weakness/numbness in lower limbs.

3. Imaging tests, such as x-ray, CT or MRI, done less than approximately two months from onset of low back pain does not improve outcomes. These can also add unnecessary costs without benefit.

4. ***Consider trying these alternatives first:***
   - Stay active! Walking and moving around help prevent muscles from stiffening. But don't overdo it with strenuous activities.
   - Apply superficial heat to ease comfort.
   - Adjust your sleeping position and your sitting position (Get up and move every 30 minutes). Putting a pillow between your legs when sleeping on your side or a pillow under your knees when sleeping on your back can reduce back discomfort.
   - Use over-the-counter pain relievers.
   - Consider physical therapy, massage or other pain relief supportive measures. Massage and spinal manipulation may provide short term relief of low back pain.

5. Exercise is the best way to relieve low back pain and prevent future issues. Activities such as aerobic exercise, stretching, and strengthening can improve pain and physical condition. Check with your doctor before starting an exercise program.

6. Opioids (Vicodin, Norco) should not initially be prescribed. Early opioid use is associated with longer disability.

If pain persists or worsens, contact your primary care physician.

This health alert is brought to you by:

TPA THE PHYSICIAN ALLIANCE

Source: ChoosingWisely.org; American Academy of Family Physicians, Michigan Quality Improvement Consortium

These items are provided solely for informational purposes and are not intended as a substitute for consultation with a medical professional. Patients with any specific questions about the items on this list or their individual health should consult their physician.