

What is chronic low back pain?

Low back pain is considered to be chronic if it has been present for longer than three months.



What causes chronic low back pain?

Chronic low back pain may be caused by many different sources. It may start from diseases, injuries or stresses to many different structures including bones, muscles, ligaments, joints, nerves or the spinal cord. The affected structure will send a signal through nerve endings, up the spinal cord and into the brain where it registers as pain.

In general, it is believed that the nerve pathways that carry the pain signals from the nerve endings through the spinal cord and to the brain may become sensitized. Sensitization of these pathways may increase the perceived pain out of proportion to the source of the pain. Stimuli that ordinarily are not perceived as painful, such as light touch, can be amplified or changed by these sensitized pathways and experienced as pain. Sometimes, even after the original injury or disease process has healed, sensitized pathways continue to send signals to the brain. These signals feel just as real and sometimes worse than the pain caused by the original injury or disease process.

Please visit knowyourback.org for more information on chronic low back pain and other spine-related topics.

How is it diagnosed?

A good patient history and a thorough physical examination by a well-trained clinician are the most important aspects of the evaluation. Serious injuries and illnesses can often be diagnosed or ruled out based on the history and physical examination alone. However, lack of a definite diagnosis does not necessarily mean more testing is needed. Needless tests do not add anything to what your health care provider has already discovered in his or her physical examination.

If your health care provider feels that more testing is needed based on your history and physical examination findings, he or she will discuss with you the appropriate tests to be ordered. Testing may include blood tests, radiography (X-ray films), bone scans, computed tomography scans, magnetic resonance imaging, diagnostic injections, electromyography and many other specialized tests.

How should chronic pain be treated?

Treatment for chronic pain includes several different general categories. These categories include physical therapy, medications, coping skills, procedures and complementary medicine treatments. Your health care provider will tailor a program involving a combination of these general options which best addresses your needs.