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# Family Circle®

**Rely on pain-relieving creams.**
The warmth they generate may feel good to you, but there's no evidence they actually help healing, says Jack Stern, M.D., a New York City neurosurgeon who specializes in treating back pain.

## Back in Action

"Whether your aches, pains and strains are new or from an old problem that won't quit, the time has come for relief. Find the best treatment for you.

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Simple do-it-yourself remedies he
better within a month's time, acco
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But there are some caveats. For i
head to an emergency room right away if you lose sensation or movement in your legs, you no longer have control of your bladder or bowels, or your pain is absolutely unmanageable. Otherwise, follow these self-treatment tips to find relief fast.

**DO ✓**

**Keep active.** When Finnish researchers looked at nearly 200 back pain sufferers three weeks after they were injured, they found that those who went about their ordinary tasks as much as possible missed fewer days of work and experienced less pain than those who climbed into bed. As little as two days of bed rest slowed recovery.

**Ice it.** During the first two days of discomfort, as often as once an hour, put ice cubes or a package of frozen peas in a resealable bag, wrap in a towel, then place on your back for 15 minutes. Cold applied to strained muscles combats swelling and inflammation, which reduces pain and speeds tissue repair.

**Take NSAIDs.** Over-the-counter nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines, such as ibuprofen, aspirin or naproxen, make the pain more manageable and reduce inflammation too. Follow the bottle's dosing schedule for three to seven days.

**DON'T ✗**

**Overdo exercise.** Wait until you're healed to start any new back strengthening and stretching routine. According to the same Finnish study, adults who did back-specific exercises in the first weeks of being injured had six more days of pain than those who simply stuck to their normal movement patterns.

**Use heat at first.** Wearable heat wraps and heating pads increase blood flow to the area, which can amp up inflammation and soreness in the first two days. But in subsequent days, when swelling subsides, heat may soothe tense muscles, reduce pain and increase your range of motion.

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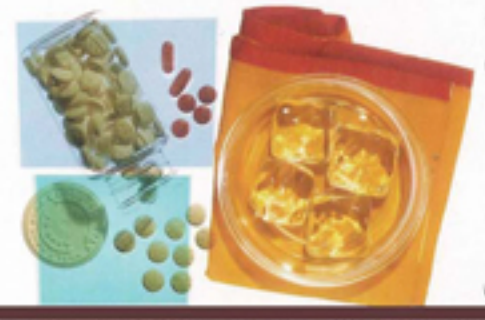
"Why am I in so much pain?"

The source of your backache shouldn't be hard to find. If you're a woman under 50, you can probably blame one of these common culprits.

**MUSCLE STRAIN** It's easy to pull the large muscles in your upper or lower back: Reaching for something or carrying your kids' lacrosse gear to the car can do it. The injured muscle will feel stiff and sore, especially the next morning. In some cases the muscle will "knot up" in painful spasms within a few hours of being hurt.

**MISALIGNED FACET JOINT** Poor posture and prolonged sitting can send the small structures that link the vertebrae of the spine out of whack. This can cause a slightly one-sided pain that gets worse when you arch your back.

**HERNIATED DISC** Normal wear and tear can cause the cushions between your vertebrae to rupture or bulge. The injured disc may press on nerve roots along the spine, causing pain. If the disc pushes on a main leg nerve, it's known as sciatica—sharp, shooting pain through the buttock and back of one leg.



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