



## Low Back Pain

Relief  
&  
Rehabilitation

**M**ost people will experience an episode of low back pain.

For many of them, the pain can become a growing problem that interferes with almost every aspect of their lives including work, family, and leisure activities. A visit to a physiatrist (rehabilitation physician) can help people get back to active, pain-free lives. A physiatrist is a specialist in physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R).

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Hope  
(Chinese Symbol)

## What Causes Low Back Pain?

Low back pain can be triggered by a wide variety of causes including:

- \* **Radiculopathy:** A pinched nerve, also called sciatica, usually from a herniated or slipped disk.
- \* **Myofascial Pain:** Generally an aching pain in muscles that can come from poor posture, sitting at a computer, or other job-related tasks. Sometimes it causes soreness in different parts of the body such as the legs.
- \* **Spinal Stenosis:** Is an abnormal narrowing of the spinal column (stenosis) that may occur in any of the regions of the spine.
- \* **Tendon, Ligament, and Soft Tissue Pain:** Localized pain when an area is stretched or its muscles are overused. This results in tenderness.
- \* **Arthritis:** A disease affecting the joints and resulting in stiffness, inflammation, and pain. Sometimes, the pain may come from a combination of factors or something not even related to the spine or back. Examples would be appendicitis, kidney disease, uterine disorders, and urinary tract infections.

## Accurate Diagnosis Leads to Management of Pain

With such a wide variety of causes, it is important to identify the root cause of your back pain.

Physiatrists have the specialized training that enables them to not only accurately diagnose the cause, but tailor a treatment plan to alleviate the pain as well. Physiatrists understand your body's "kinetic chain." For example, you may have a problem with your ankle, which leads you to alter the way you walk and causes low back pain.

By diagnosing and managing low back pain, physiatrists help patients return to their daily activities.



## Whole Care

The PM&R treatment approach emphasizes comprehensive care. Physiatrists take the whole person into account and treat the patient not just the symptom.

## Why PM&R for Low Back Pain?

PM&R is a medical specialty dedicated to restoring optimal function for people with injuries or illness. Physiatrists are specialists in diagnosing and treating problems of the musculoskeletal system. They offer a non-surgical approach to pain and injury, which makes them the ideal choice for low back pain.

After completing medical school, a physiatrist completes an accredited four-year residency program in PM&R. Many physiatrists also go on to become board certified in the specialty by passing a series of exams.

With this advanced training, physiatrists are experts in examining all aspects of back pain – they may determine that there are underlying problems in other parts of your body that are causing your low back pain. Most important, physiatrists have many treatment methods available to reduce or eliminate your problems and to decrease the possibility of a recurrence.

They conduct a thorough exam and collect your medical history to identify the source of your pain, injury, or disability, even when standard diagnostic tests don't find specific problems. In addition, physiatrists direct your treatment team if you need any other services, such as those of a physical therapist or athletic trainer. The result is a customized treatment program tailored for you.

By evaluating the impact of a condition on the whole person – medically, socially, emotionally, and vocationally – physiatrists help their patients understand and take control of their health.

## PM&R diagnosis and treatment of low back pain

**PM&R treatment is non-surgical.** Typically less than 5% of those with low back pain need surgery to correct their problem. Should a patient require surgery, the rehabilitation physician will coordinate care both before and after surgery for maximum rehabilitation. Some of the treatments and diagnostic techniques used by rehabilitation physicians for low back pain include:

- \* Medically supervised exercise program
- \* Medication
- \* Electrical stimulation/electromyography
- \* Injections
- \* Ergonomic assessment/modification
- \* Acupuncture

## The rehabilitation of low back problems occurs in three phases

**Phase one:** During the first phase, called the acute phase, rehabilitation physicians treat pain and inflammation.

**Phase Two:** Once your pain has been controlled, you move into the recovery phase. Here, flexibility and strength are developed to help get you back to your daily work, sports, and leisure activities.

**Phase Three:** The goal of the maintenance phase is to minimize recurrence of the problem and to prevent further injury. Patients learn ways to avoid causing the injury again.

To learn more about physical medicine and rehabilitation, visit [www.aapmr.org](http://www.aapmr.org).

Your primary care physician can also refer you to a specialist.



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