



Student Health Center

UNC Wilmington

INSTRUCTION SHEET: BACK INJURY

The Student Health Provider has diagnosed a back injury. A back injury most often results from 1) a strain of the muscles, tendons, and ligaments in the back, or from 2) a slipped disc. A slipped disc occurs when one of the disks between the vertebrae (bones in the backbone) slips out of place and pushes on a nerve. Pain from a slipped disc is typically more severe and sharp than the aching pain from a back strain. A slipped disc can also cause pain and tingling down the leg.

The initial treatment of a back injury, whether it is from a strain or a slipped disc, is similar (as below). Slipped disc injuries can take longer to heal, but 90% show gradual improvement over about 6 weeks.

At present, no sign of a more serious, disabling (long-term) injury to the vertebrae or spinal cord is present.

MEASURES YOU SHOULD TAKE TO HELP TREAT YOUR BACK INJURY:

- 1- Rest your back. Allow your body time to heal. Time is the best treatment of all for a back injury.
- 3- Apply cold to the sore area the first 24 hours after injury. After 24 hours, apply heat. Avoid burning the skin by too-hot applications.
- 3- Find your position(s) of comfort. Listen to your body — it will tell you the positions that cause the least pain and strain to the injured area.
- 4- Continue normal activities as possible. Strict bedrest is not necessary unless significant pain occurs with just moving about. Light work duties are reasonable. A return to heavy, physical labor will likely need to be postponed.
- 5- Over-the-counter pain medications can help ease the discomfort of a back injury. Acetaminophen (Tylenol), naproxen, or ibuprofen can be taken, depending on individual preference. Ibuprofen and naproxen, unlike acetaminophen, also reduce inflammation; decreasing inflammation aids the healing process.
- 6- Stronger prescription pain/muscle relaxant medication may be required, especially in the first few days after a back injury. Take the medication only if needed. The medication can cause drowsiness, so perform no dangerous tasks (driving, operating machinery, etc.) while taking the medication.
- 7- Make a prompt follow-up appointment with your family/referral doctor. Your doctor can follow the healing progress along with you, and deal with problems or persistent discomfort should they occur.
- 8- If there is a marked change in symptoms, see your personal/referral doctor or go to the closest emergency department promptly. Specifically, seek care promptly if there is severe, incapacitating pain, or loss of movement in the legs or arms.