



Back problems

What are back problems?

Back problems are a range of conditions related to the bones, joints, connective tissue, muscles and nerves of the back. These conditions can affect the neck (cervical spine), upper back (thoracic spine) and lower back (lumbar spine) as well as the sacrum and tailbone (coccyx) (Figure 1).

Back problems include:

- pain in the neck, lower, middle and upper back
- pain, tingling, numbness or weakness in the legs starting from the lower back
- narrowing of the spine canal through which the spinal cord passes
- degeneration of the disc and spinal joints
- pressure on the spinal nerve attached to the spinal cord.

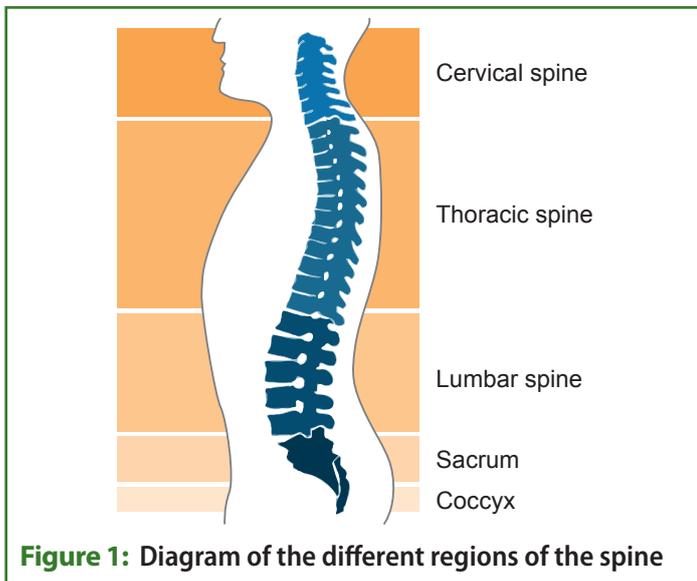


Figure 1: Diagram of the different regions of the spine

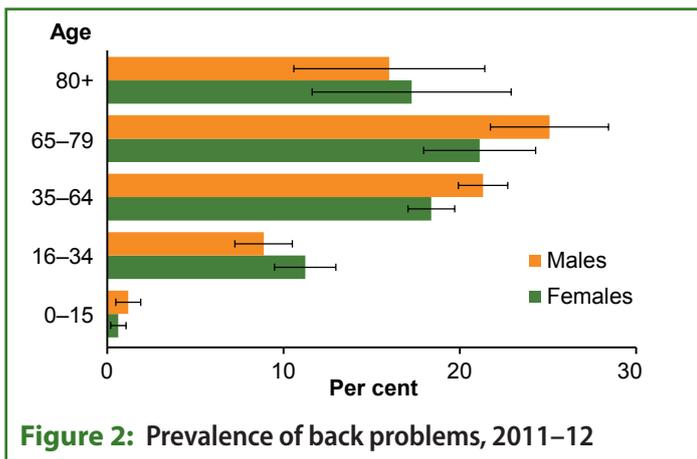


Figure 2: Prevalence of back problems, 2011-12

Fast Facts

1 in 7 Australians (13.6%) reported having back problems—that's 3 million people



Over 2 in 5 people with back problems (44%) have difficulty in tasks and activities associated with mobility, communication or self-care



1st according to the Global Burden of Disease estimates, low back pain is ranked 1st in Australasia (including Australia and New Zealand), compared to 6th in the world



Who gets back problems?

Based on self-reported data from the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics National Health Survey (2011-12), about 3 million Australians (13.6%) reported having back problems, similar for men (13.8%) and women (12.8%). This includes back pain/problems not elsewhere classified, disc disorders and sciatica and curvature of the spine.

Back problems were most common among those aged 65-79 (affecting 25.1% of men and 21.1% of women in this age group) and least common in those aged from 0-15 (Figure 2).

How do you manage back problems?

General practitioners (GPs)

GPs are often a key point of contact within the health care system for people with back problems. In 2012-13, 2.9 of every 100 GP-patient encounters were for the management of back problems—about 3.7 million GP encounters.

Management of back problems in general practice includes:

- assessment
- referral to other health services (allied health, specialists, diagnostic testing and hospitals)
- prescribing, advising and supplying medication
- patient education.



Medications

It is important to work with your health practitioner to identify suitable treatment plans for managing the symptoms of back problems. This may include medications such as simple analgesics like paracetamol and/or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. In some instances oral opioids (such as codeine) may be necessary to relieve severe back pain.

Hospitals

According to the National Hospital Morbidity Database, in 2012–13 there were 104,350 hospitalisations with a principal diagnosis of back problems. The common reasons for back problem hospitalisations were:

- lower back pain (28.5%)
- lumbar and other disc disorders with radiculopathy (i.e. when one or more nerves is affected and does not work properly) (14.0%)
- spinal stenosis of the lumbar region (i.e. abnormal narrowing of the spinal canal that causes compression of the spinal cord) (8.9%).

How do back problems affect quality of life?

Compared to those without the condition, people with back problems are:

- 2.4 times as likely to report poor health
- 2.6 times as likely to report very high levels of psychological distress
- 2.5 times as likely to report severe and very severe pain
- 3.4 times as likely to report a core activity limitation (for example, self-care or mobility).

How much is spent on back problems?

Based on AIHW disease expenditure data, \$1.2 billion was attributed to back problems in 2008–09 (the most recent year for which data are available). This expenditure consisted of:

- \$560 million on admitted patient costs (47.6%)
- \$464 million on out-of-hospital-costs (39.4%)
- \$153 million on prescription pharmaceuticals (13.0%).

Expenditure on back problems is not fully captured in these estimates due to a lack of comprehensive data, for example on allied health costs such as visiting a physiotherapist or chiropractor and over-the-counter medications such as paracetamol.

What can I do to help prevent back problems?

Consult your health professional for specific advice on:

- strengthening back muscles; this will help reduce and prevent back pain
- developing good posture while sitting, standing and sleeping
- maintaining a healthy weight; excess weight places a strain on your back
- using correct lifting methods; lifting objects incorrectly at work or home is one of the largest causes of back problems.

Where can I find out more?

AIHW online web pages:

<<http://www.aihw.gov.au/back-problems>>

AIHW National Centre for Monitoring Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Conditions:

Tel: 02 6244 1000

Email: ncmamsc@aihw.gov.au

Other resources:

National Health and Medical Research Council 2003. Evidence-based Management of Acute Musculoskeletal Pain. Accessed 7 November 2014 Available at: <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/file/publications/synopses/cp94.pdf>

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