

Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Apr 25, 2022

Slipped disk (lower back): what is it?

A slipped disk can be very painful. But in most people the pain gets better on its own within about six weeks. If it doesn't get better there are treatments that can help, including surgery.

What is a slipped disk?

Although people talk about a slipped disk, nothing in your spine has actually slipped out of place. If your doctor says you have a slipped disk it means one of the disks that sit between each of the bones in your spine has been damaged.

The outer shell of the disk has torn and the spongy inner pad, which cushions the bones, is bulging out. It may be pressing on a nerve. This is what causes the pain.

Slipped disks are often caused by strain on your lower back. Things that make slipped disks more likely include:

- being older
- having a job that involves heavy lifting
- having a job that involves sitting for a long time or driving for long periods
- being very overweight
- smoking, and
- playing strenuous contact sports, such as football.

Slipped disks are more common in men than in women. Back problems also seem to run in families.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom is pain in your lower back. It might start as an ache or it might come on suddenly as a sharp, severe pain. You may find it painful to sit, stand, or move around.

As well as the pain in their lower back, many people with a slipped disk get pain running down one leg. This happens when the damaged disk presses on a nerve that runs down the leg to the feet.

Slipped disk (lower back): what is it?

The nerve is called the **sciatic nerve** and this type of pain is called **sciatica**. If this happens you may feel pain, numbness, or "pins and needles" in your legs or feet.

It's not always easy to diagnose a slipped disk. Your doctor will probably ask you questions about the pain and examine you.

For example, they might ask you to raise your leg, keeping it straight, while you lie on your back. If you get sciatica pain before the leg is two-thirds of the way up, this suggests that you have a slipped disk.

The pain of a slipped disk usually goes away within six weeks. But if it lasts longer your doctor may send you to see a back-pain specialist. You might need an **MRI scan** of your spine. A scan can tell for sure if you have a slipped disk.

You should seek medical attention right away if you:

- have bad back pain that is getting worse
- get a feeling of weakness in both your legs
- lose control over your bladder or bowels, or
- feel numb around your buttocks and genital region.

These symptoms could mean that you have a more serious problem with your spinal cord that may need emergency treatment.

What to expect in the future

Pain from a slipped disk gets better without treatment for 9 out of 10 people. Most people feel better within six weeks, but it can take longer.

Back pain from a slipped disk may come back, whether or not you have treatment. It's important to learn how to avoid over-straining or damaging your back again. A physical therapist can advise you about ways to protect your back when lifting things, or when sitting for a long time.

The patient information from *BMJ Best Practice* is regularly updated. The most recent version of Best Practice can be found at bestpractice.bmj.com. This information is intended for use by health professionals. It is not a substitute for medical advice. It is strongly recommended that you independently verify any interpretation of this material and, if you have a medical problem, see your doctor.

Please see BMJ's full terms of use at: bmj.com/company/legal-information. BMJ does not make any representations, conditions, warranties or guarantees, whether express or implied, that this material is accurate, complete, up-to-date or fit for any particular purposes.

© BMJ Publishing Group Ltd 2024. All rights reserved.

What did you think about this patient information guide?



Slipped disk (lower back): what is it?

Complete the [online survey](#) or scan the QR code to help us to ensure our content is of the highest quality and relevant for patients. The survey is anonymous and will take around 5 minutes to complete.

