

## Conditions & Treatments

### Relief for your aching back: What worked for our readers

About 80 percent of the adults in the U.S. have been bothered by back pain at some point. The Consumer Reports Health Ratings Center recently surveyed more than 14,000 subscribers who experienced lower-back pain in the past year but never had back surgery. More than half said the pain severely limited their daily routine for a week or longer, and 88 percent said it recurred throughout the year.

Lower-back pain disrupts many aspects of life. In our survey, 46 percent said that it interfered with their sleep, 31 percent reported that it thwarted their efforts to maintain a healthy weight, and 24 percent said that it hampered their sex life.

#### Where to go for treatment

When back pain goes on and on, many people go to see a primary-care doctor. While this visit may help rule out any serious underlying disease, a surprising number of the lower-back-pain sufferers we surveyed said they were disappointed with what the doctor could do to help. Although many of our respondents who saw a primary-care doctor left dissatisfied, doctors can write prescriptions and give referrals for hands-on treatments that might be covered by health insurance.

#### Who helped the most?

The percentage of people highly (completely or very) satisfied with their back-pain treatments and advice varied by practitioner visited.



**Our survey respondents tried an average of five or six different treatments over the course of just a year.**

Professional	Highly satisfied
Chiropractor	59%
Physical therapist	55%
Acupuncturist	53%
Physician, specialist	44%
Physician, primary-care doctor	34%

Source: Consumer Reports Health Ratings Center

Patients with lower-back pain are faced with a confusing list of options. Our survey respondents tried an average of five or six different treatments over the course of just a year. We asked them to rate [a comprehensive list of remedies](#) (available to subscribers) and had enough data to rate 23 treatments. We analyzed the medical evidence for each and came up with recommendations and cautions. Here are some highlights from our survey findings:

- Hands-on treatments were rated by lower-back-pain sufferers as very helpful. Survey respondents favored [chiropractic treatments \(58 percent\)](#), [massage \(48 percent\)](#), and [physical therapy \(46 percent\)](#) (available to subscribers)—another testament to the healing power of touch.
- Spinal injections were rated just below chiropractic treatments by those who took our survey. Fifty-one percent of the respondents found them to be very helpful, although the techniques their doctors used varied.

- [Prescription medications](#) (available to subscribers), which one-third of our respondents said they took, were rated as beneficial by 45 percent of them. Almost 70 percent said they took an over-the-counter medication, but only 22 percent said the drugs were very helpful.
- Fifty-eight percent told us they wished they had done more exercising to strengthen their backs.
- Although lower-back pain is the fifth most common reason people go to a doctor, 35 percent of the people in our survey said they had never consulted a professional. Most of them had severely limiting pain for less than a week. Many of those with more prolonged pain who didn't see a health-care professional said it was because of cost concerns or because they did not think professional care could help.

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