Patient Information: Low Back Pain

When should I see a doctor for low back symptoms?
- New, severe low back pain
- Low back pain not improved by rest, activity modification, or over-the-counter medications
- Pain, numbness, or tingling that radiates from your back into your legs

What can cause low back problems?
- Degeneration of the discs that cushion your vertebrae (spinal bones) from injury
- Weakness or imbalance in your abdominal and back muscles (core)
- Poor posture
- Abnormal curvature of the spine (scoliosis, lordosis)
- Fractures or stress injuries to your vertebrae from trauma or overuse

How are low back problems diagnosed?
- Your doctor will perform an exam to evaluate your muscle strength, posture, spinal alignment, and sources of pain
- X-rays can be obtained to evaluate the bones of your spine
- An MRI may be obtained to evaluate the muscles, cartilage, and bones in your back
- A nerve study called an EMG may be ordered to evaluate symptoms of numbness, tingling, or weakness

How are low back problems treated?
- The initial treatment for most low back problems is conservative care:
  - Resting from activities that increase pain
  - Taking medications such as anti-inflammatories
  - Applying ice and heat
  - Doing regular light stretching of back muscles
- If your pain persists, certain anti-inflammatory injections may be performed
- The goal is to help manage pain so that you can perform physical therapy and strengthening- the most important part of treatment for low back pain is strengthening and stabilizing the muscles that support your spine
- In certain severe cases, surgery may be indicated

How can I prevent low back problems?
- Perform regular core stretching and strengthening exercises
- Maintain good posture and spinal alignment by using supportive chairs and mattresses, standing regularly at work, and lifting with good form (bending at the knees rather than the back)
- Proactively address back pain when it starts

Where can I learn more about low back health?
- Spine rehabilitation and conditioning- OrthoInfo: https://www.orthoinfo.org/globalassets/pdfs/2017-rehab_spine.pdf
- Yoga for back pain- Yoga with Adriene: http://yogawithadriene.com/yoga-for-back-pain/

Adapted from: American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (www.aaos.org), Hospital for Special Surgery (www.hss.edu), Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.org)
This information is for patient reference only. It is not intended to diagnose or guide treatment without evaluation by a physician.