

Back issues are commonly misdiagnosed

Why back pain is difficult to diagnose and how you can get clarity

Back pain is very common and can sometimes be severe or debilitating, with about 80 percent of adults experiencing lower back pain at some point in their lifetime.¹

Spondylosis, one of many possible causes of lower back pain, is a medical term referring to osteoarthritis (bone weakness) of the spine and spinal deterioration.

Often, back pain begins abruptly as a result of an accident or by lifting something heavy. But in spondylosis cases, it can develop in older patients due to age-related changes of the spine. In these cases, basic wear and tear of the spine over time can result in abnormal growths (bone spurs), and the disks can lose fluid and become stiffer, **according to C. David Lin, MD, one of the expert medical professionals at Best Doctors whose specialization is in physical medicine and rehabilitation.**

Back pain affects men and women equally. Some back issues are short-term and can resolve themselves with self-care, depending on the cause, while others require more specific, lasting attention.

Treatment options are as varied as the multiple causes of back problems. Surgery can often be avoided, except in cases of nerve compression, back pain associated with bowel or bladder dysfunction, or pain related to an unstable spine such as in malignancy or trauma, according to Dr. Lin.

In addition to spondylosis, there are many different conditions that can cause lower back pain, including:

- Bulging or herniated disk, which causes nerve compression, inflammation, and pain
- Spinal stenosis, when the spinal canal or a nerve passageway narrows
- Spondylolisthesis, which occurs when a lumbar (low back) vertebral body slips forward over the vertebra below it
- Vertebral fractures caused by some type of trauma or impact
- Osteomyelitis, a bacterial infection that can develop in one of the spine's bones
- Spinal tumors

Whether the pain comes from spondylosis or another cause, treatment options include physical therapy, stretching, and exercises that target the core and lower back, along with medication in some cases.

Misdiagnosis of back issues is common, based on the multitude of possible causes of back pain. For example, when younger patients develop spondylosis, it is often overlooked because they are considered too young to have a great deal of spinal deterioration.

While weight management and physical fitness can play a role in spinal health, spinal deterioration can be difficult to diagnose and treat. If you or a loved one is ever unsure about a diagnosis or treatment plan, use Best Doctors expert medical opinion service so you can be confident about your next course of action. Our specialists can either confirm or recommend a change, based on our in-depth review of your existing condition.

¹<https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/Patient-Caregiver-Education/Fact-Sheets/Low-Back-Pain-Fact-Sheet>

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