Dear Alice,

While bending over to pick up a rather heavy box, I felt (and heard) a ripping sound. Much pain ensued and over the course of several hours my back became stiff and painful to the point of being unable to stand fully erect. What happened and should I see a doctor?

? Spineless

Answer

Dear Spineless,

Back pain can be a real pain in the neck? and back! It's difficult to know exactly what happened with your back. Back pain can have multiple causes ? strains and sprains being two examples. It's also not clear from your question whether or not you are still experiencing pain or how long the pain lasted. Your best bet is to visit a health care provider just to be on the safe side.

Generally, back pain will lessen within 72 hours, and eventually go away within two weeks. However, chronic, disabling back pain may be a symptom of something more serious. Certain cases of the back blues may require more immediate medical attention of a health care provider, which can include:

- Numbness, tingling, or loss of control in your arms or legs ? this may signal damage to the spinal cord
- Increase in pain when you cough or bend forward at the waist ? this can be the sign of a herniated disc
- Pain that extends downward along the back of the leg
- Pain accompanied by fever, burning during urination, or strong-smelling urine
- Urine or fecal incontinence
- Dull pain in one area of your spine when lying in or getting out of bed
- Fever or unintentional weight loss
Most people have or will experience back pain sometime in their life. In fact, back pain is the second most reported complaint next to headaches. This could be a result of prolonged bad habits or the result of an acute injury, such as the one you describe in your question. As mentioned above, two causes of back pain include strains and sprains. Symptoms of sprains and strains include:

- Pain that worsens with movement.
- Muscle cramping or spasms (sudden uncontrollable muscle contractions).
- Decreased function and/or range of motion of the joint (difficulty walking, bending forward or sideways, or standing straight).
- In some cases, the person may feel a pop or tear at the time of the injury.

Treatment for sprains and strains are similar. You can reduce the pain and muscle spasms by resting and using ice packs and compression, especially in the first 24 to 48 hours after the injury. An over-the-counter pain reliever such as ibuprofen (e.g., Advil, Motrin), acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol), or naproxen sodium (e.g., Aleve) may be recommended to help reduce pain and swelling. It is recommended to return to your normal activities 24 to 48 hours after the injury (without inducing any pain, of course). This is because prolonged bed rest often prolongs symptoms and delays recovery. Most people improve in about two weeks.

Again, seeing a health care provider may be your best bet. Next time you have to lift something heavy, there's no need to be too proud to ask a friend to help back you up.

Alice!
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