

Helpful Supplements for Back Pain

Nearly half of all adults suffer from [back pain](#) in any given year. The good news is that most backaches, however uncomfortable, are not serious and clear up in the course of a week or two. Lingering back pain, though, can be difficult to treat. A recent survey found that almost 40 percent of people who consulted a medical doctor for low back pain also tried supplements and other alternative remedies.

If you're considering trying supplements for back pain, it's useful to regard the condition as two separate problems--one acute, one chronic. For acute back pain, supplements generally don't provide immediate relief. Try bed rest for a couple days and see how you feel. If necessary, see your doctor about prescription drugs.

Chronic back pain is a different story. Here, supplements can be very beneficial, especially when used long term. If you're prone to back problems, start a strengthening program with bone and cartilage builders, such as glucosamine, calcium/magnesium, boron, and niacinamide. Then, if you need something for ongoing pain control, try one of the pain-relieving supplements. Most can be taken in conjunction with conventional drugs, except for white willow bark, which shouldn't be combined with aspirin. Therapeutic benefits may be noticed within a week of starting supplements.

Long-Term Strengthening Supplements

Glucosamine sulfate

Some cases of back pain result from weakened bones or cartilage or a slipped disk (an intensely painful condition). [Glucosamine](#) helps build cartilage, including the tissue supporting spinal disks. This supplement is especially good for long-term use; it may take two months or so to see benefits.

Suggested dose: 500 mg 3 times a day. Best to take on an empty stomach, but can take with food if needed.

Calcium and magnesium

Both [calcium](#) and [magnesium](#) are bone-strengthening minerals. Magnesium also seems to act as a muscle relaxant.

Suggested dose: 600 mg calcium and 250 mg magnesium a day. Take with food for best absorption. Calcium and magnesium can also be purchased together as part of a bone-building formula.

Boron

A trace mineral, [boron](#) is often included in extra-strength multivitamins. Boron helps the body absorb calcium and magnesium.

Suggested dose: 1 to 3 mg a day. Take with food.

Pain-Relieving Supplements

Niacinamide

Any inflammation that affects the bones in the spine or the muscles, [cartilage](#), nerves, or other tissues supporting the spine can bring on pain. Niacinamide, a form of the B vitamin niacin, can be an effective anti-inflammatory. It also helps heal damaged cartilage.

Suggested dose: 500 mg 3 times a day. Take with food to minimize digestive upset. Physician monitoring is needed during treatment because niacinamide, like all forms of niacin, can damage the liver if taken in these high doses. The supplement may also aggravate diabetes, low blood pressure, bleeding problems, glaucoma, gout, liver disease, or ulcers.

White Willow Bark

This supplement has pain-relieving properties similar to those of aspirin. However, [white willow bark](#) appears to have far fewer side effects.

Suggested dose: 1 or 2 pills 3 times a day (follow package directions). Don't use white willow bark in conjunction with aspirin. Look for preparations standardized to contain 15% salicin, the active ingredient.

Bromelain

[Bromelain](#), an enzyme found in pineapple, may reduce inflammation and back pain from surgery, trauma, sports injuries, arthritis, and other causes.

Suggested dose: 500 mg 3 times a day. Take between meals. Look for preparations that provide 6,000 to 9,000 GDU (gelatin digesting units) daily.

Boswellia

An Ayurvedic herbal remedy long used in India, [boswellia](#) has anti-inflammatory properties.

Suggested dose: 1 pill 3 times a day. Take with food to minimize digestive upset. Each pill should be standardized to contain 150 mg boswellic acids.

Devil's claw

Devil's claw, an herb native to Africa, has long been used to

relieve arthritic pain. Research suggests it may boost the effectiveness of conventional pain-relieving drugs.

Suggested dose: 400 mg 3 times a day. Take with or without food. May be most effective when used with conventional drugs.

See your doctor

Before beginning a supplement program, check with your doctor to determine whether medical or surgical treatment is warranted for your particular back problem. Also be sure to call the doctor if:

- pain is disabling or accompanied by fever or vomiting;
- tingling or numbness appears in arms or legs, or intense pain extends down the leg (sciatica);
- pain and stiffness affect one area of the spine upon waking;
- pain follows a fall, a car accident, or other traumatic injury.

For more information

For additional assistance from our **WholeHealthMD** physicians, be sure to visit our Healing Path on [Back Pain](#). And for more in-depth information on individual supplements, see our library entries on [glucosamine](#), [calcium](#), [magnesium](#), [boron](#), niacinamide, [white willow bark](#), [bromelain](#), and [boswellia](#).

In addition to supplements, a range of therapies may provide effective back pain relief. See *At the Root of Back Pain*, which describes an innovative--and highly successful--mind-body program run by Dr. John E. Sarno at the Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine in New York City. And hear what Dr. Robert R. Holcomb from Vanderbilt University Medical Center has to say about magnets at [Ask Our Experts](#)