

# Physical Therapy Exercises & Stretches for Acute Back Muscle Spasms

Acute back pain is almost always due to a muscle spasm, or lumbar strain. These typically happen after being in one position for too long and then moving awkwardly, immediately resulting in the back muscles spasming and “locking-up” the back so that it’s difficult to stand up straight, bend forward or backward, or move easily. They also tend to happen when picking something up (such as deadlifting or bending forward and picking up something off the floor) or back squatting, likely secondary to 1) poor form or 2) muscle fatigue, as spasms tend to happen toward the end of a workout—just like hamstring strains tend to occur more often at the end of practice or a game.

Many patients are understandably afraid that they’ve herniated a disc and that’s what is causing their severe pain and the muscle spasm. However, research doesn’t support that assumption. Research has found that you only need to be worried about a disc herniation if you felt the back pain AND had an immediate onset of severe, burning pain down only one leg or develop foot drop or unexplained severe pain-free weakness. If this happened, definitely go see your PCM! But it’s also important to remember that about 60-80% of adults without any back pain have 1-3 disc herniations; remember that disc degeneration and herniation are a normal part of aging!

So if you’re suffering from acute back pain and pain that refers (radiates) into one or both of your buttocks and/or thighs, then you most likely have an isolated muscle spasm.

*What can I do to get some relief?*

You get rid of muscle spasms just like athletes get rid of cramping muscles during a game or practice—by stretching out the muscles! Immediately—through the pain!!! It seems counterintuitive that stretching into a very tight, painful muscle is what you should be doing, but that’s exactly right.

1. **You want to gently but firmly begin stretching into the pain.** Begin with the stretches on the following page. Slowly progress from the easier ones (like Childs Pose) to the rotational ones (like Single Leg Over).
2. **Stay active.** Stretching is very effective, but muscles that getting worked stretch out even better. So go for walks, climb up/down stairs, or do some light exercise just to get your heart pumping blood to the spasming muscles. Then stretch them out again. Often, the exercise will help the muscles return to normal quicker than if you only stretch or just rest.
3. **Do NOT lie down or sit down and not move!** This was common advice about 100 years ago... and somehow persists to this day! But now we know that makes the pain last longer!



# Immediate Stretches for an Acute Back Muscle Spasm

## Stretch #1 - Childs Pose

**Goal:** 30-60 sec - Start on your hands & knees and gently but firmly push your hips back until you can get your buttocks on your heels, as shown

Alternative position: Stretch from a chair (far right)



## Stretch #2- Supine Knees to Chest

**Goal:** 30-60 sec - Lie on your back and bend your knees as if doing a situp. Grab your knees (or start with just 1 knee) and pull them to your chest so that your buttocks stretch up off the floor



## Stretch #4 - Prone on Elbows

**Goal:** 10-60 sec - Lie down on your stomach and progressively push yourself up until you can rest on your elbows. This position often hurts but is important and helps restoring lower back mobility and shortens the muscles, which helps them stop spasming.



## Stretch #5 - Supine Spinal Rotations

**Goal:** Do 10-15 reps rotating from as far as you can go to the left all the way over to the right, progressively going further and further into the pain (you might get your back to "pop": doing this, which sometimes helps alleviate the pain)



## Stretch #6 - Sidelying Spinal Rotations

**Goal:** Do 10-15 reps on each side, progressively rotating further and further into the pain (you might get your back to "pop": doing this, which sometimes helps alleviate the pain)



# Progressing the Stretches for an Acute Back Muscle Spasm

## Cat—Cow

**Goal:** Do 10-20 reps up as high as possible and down as low as possible, moving in a nice, steady speed progressively pushing further and further



## Prone Press-Ups

**Goal:** Do 10-20 reps progressively increasing from pushing your shoulders and chest from the floor up until your elbows are straight



## Spinal Rotation Stretches

**Goal:** Do 10-15 reps each direction progressively pushing as far as you can (a great way to pop your own back)

