

Joint Instability

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What Is Joint Instability?

Joint instability means a joint is not being properly controlled by the muscles and nervous system that support it. This can cause the joint to feel “loose,” painful, or unreliable during movement. In the spine, this is often called **segmental or functional instability**.

Common Symptoms

- Pain in the neck or low back with movement or pressure
- Muscle tightness or spasms
- Feeling like the back “catches,” locks, or gives out
- Pain when bending forward or returning to standing
- Pain during everyday movements like getting up from a chair or turning
- Discomfort with sitting without back support
- Pain that worsens with repeated or prolonged positions
- Repeated flare-ups of the same area over time

What Causes It?

Joint instability may develop from:

- Injury or repeated strain
- Weak or poorly coordinated core or stabilizing muscles
- Poor movement patterns or posture
- Previous sprains or disc injuries
- Deconditioning after periods of pain or inactivity

How Is It Diagnosed?

Diagnosis is based on your symptoms, medical history, and a physical examination.

There are two general types:

- **Functional instability:** Poor muscle control and movement coordination (most common)
- **Structural (mechanical) instability:** Actual excessive movement of the joint, sometimes requiring advanced imaging or surgical evaluation

Imaging is not always needed and is mainly used when a more serious structural problem is suspected.

Treatment

Treatment may include:

- Stabilization and strengthening exercises (most important part of recovery)
- Core strengthening and movement control training
- Manual therapy or chiropractic care
- Soft tissue therapy and massage
- Ice or heat therapy for symptom relief
- Bracing or taping for temporary support when needed
- Education on posture and safe movement patterns
- Most cases improve with conservative care focused on improving stability and control

Other Treatment Options

- Anti-inflammatory medications
- Muscle relaxants for short-term relief
- Injections for persistent pain
- Surgery (rare, only in severe structural instability cases)

Prognosis

The outlook is generally very good. Most patients improve significantly with consistent rehabilitation and exercise-based care. Long-term success depends on continuing strengthening and stability exercises after symptoms improve.

Typical Duration of Care

A common treatment plan may include:

- About **2 visits per week for 6 weeks**
- Then **1 visit per week for 3 weeks**
- Total: approximately **15 visits**, depending on progress

Home exercises are essential for lasting results and preventing recurrence.

When to Seek Medical Attention

Seek medical care if you experience:

- Severe or worsening pain after injury
- Progressive weakness or loss of function
- Loss of bowel or bladder control
- Symptoms that do not improve with treatment

Key Point - Joint instability is usually a **movement control problem**, not permanent damage—and most people recover well with the right strengthening and stabilization program.