DR. JASON PIROZZOLO

What Boat Back Pain Feels Like: What Should You Watch For?

Back pain tied to small boat work often feels worse after repeated jolts, hard landings, or long stretches bracing your body. The ache is often in the low back, but some people notice a sharper pain after a rough run or after riding twisted instead of facing forward. Even calm water does not rule it out, because some impact injuries have happened when conditions did not seem especially rough.

Jason Pirozzolo, DO, a sports medicine physician, says boat related back pain usually matters most when it starts changing how you work, lift, or move the next day. "Use a supported, forward-facing posture rather than riding sideways or with the back twisted," Dr. Pirozzolo says. That advice fits a common pattern, because repeated impacts and awkward positions can leave your back sore well after you step off the boat.

Know when to have it checked

Come in when your back pain keeps returning after boat days, lasts beyond a short rest period, or starts changing the way you bend, lift, or stand at work. It is also worth being seen when the same run keeps bringing the pain back, even after you have eased up and paid attention to how you sit or brace.

What research shows so far

A 2024 review in Military Medicine found that the lower back made up 26 percent of reported injuries in high-speed boat operators. A 2022 study in Clinical Orthopedics and Related Research also found that many injuries in former military boat operators were linked to sideways or forward impacts. That matches what many small boat workers notice, since your back often takes the load when your body is braced and then hit again and again.

Seat position matters too. Guidance from Britain's Maritime and Coastguard Agency says vertical movement is often greater farther forward, while the driver may feel much less of it. A 2023 study in the Journal of Clinical Medicine described 79 patients with 90 spinal fractures after recreational motorboat trips, and many were seated near the bow. The figures cannot be directly applied to local fishing boats because most subjects were military or professional operators, not racers or charter captains.

Common mistakes that keep it going

One common mistake is judging the whole ride by the seat at the wheel. "Judge speed by the roughest occupied seat, not by comfort at the wheel," Dr. Pirozzolo says. That matters on a small boat, because the person farther forward may be taking more vertical motion than the driver feels, including on a run from a Stock Island dock.

Another mistake is staying twisted, riding sideways, or standing without a stable base while your back keeps absorbing the same hit. "Keep stable foot placement and accessible

handholds," Dr. Pirozzolo says. "Avoid repeated hard landings." People also assume only rough water causes trouble, but some reported spine injuries happened in relatively calm water, so it helps to respect the repeated impact and not just the forecast.

"Check with passengers, move them to suitable protected seats, and slow down before they stand or move about," Dr. Pirozzolo says. The point is simple. When your back starts flaring after runs, look at the repeated hits first, then make changes before the next trip.

"Avoid repeated hard landings," Dr. Pirozzolo says. That is the main thing to watch before your next run back to work on the boat. If your back still hurts after boat days or keeps changing how you move, have it checked before you head out again.

If your back pain keeps coming back after boat work, or the same trip keeps setting it off, have it looked at before your next run. Contact **Key West Concierge Orthopedics**.

Questions About Boat Related Back Pain

Does boat back pain always mean one big injury?

Not always. Repeated impacts, awkward bracing, and time spent twisted can all leave your back painful even without one clear moment.

Can calm water still bother your back on a boat?

Yes. Some reported spinal injuries after motorboat trips happened in relatively calm water, so a smoother day does not always mean less strain.

Does a better seat fix the whole problem?

Not by itself. A suspension seat can reduce impact in some settings, but seat choice does not replace careful speed, position, and boat handling.

Sources

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