

Telling the doctor where it hurts

French A1 (beginner) · Lesson

Quick answer: To tell a doctor what is wrong in French, say Je suis malade (I am sick) and use avoir mal à plus the body part: J'ai mal à la tête, J'ai mal au dos, J'ai mal aux dents. Add J'ai de la fièvre for a fever. In an emergency, dial 15 (SAMU) or 112.

Level: French A1 (CEFR beginner) · **Standards:** CEFR A1, Spoken interaction

How do you say you are sick in French?

Start with the simple state: Je suis malade — I am sick. Add how you feel with avoir: J'ai de la fièvre — I have a fever. J'ai froid — I'm cold. J'ai chaud — I'm hot. For a cough or a cold, say Je tousse (I cough) or Je suis enrhumé(e) (I have a cold).

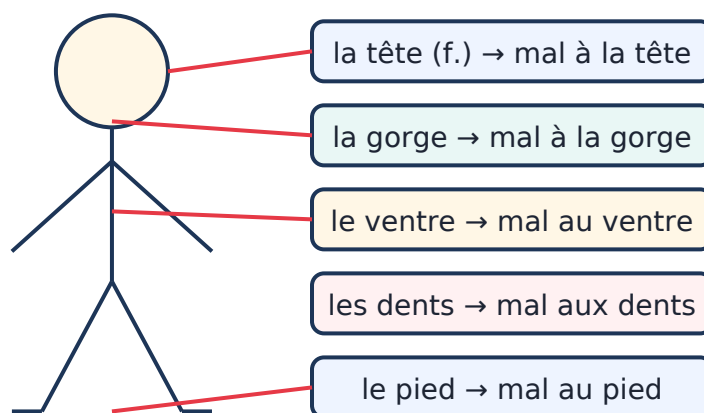
Definition

Avoir mal à + body part means "to have a pain in" or "to have a(n) ... ache". It works for any part of the body, and the verb avoir is conjugated: j'ai mal, tu as mal, il a mal, nous avons mal.

How do you say where it hurts?

The preposition à changes with the gender and number of the body part.

Body part	Pattern	Example
le dos (masc.)	au	J'ai mal au dos.
la gorge (fem.)	à la	Awa a mal à la gorge.
l'oreille (fem., vowel)	à l'	J'ai mal à l'oreille.
les dents (plural)	aux	Il a mal aux dents.



Body parts and the matching avoir mal à phrase.

Common mistake

English speakers say "I am sick in my head" or "my head hurts" word for word. In French the structure is fixed: J'ai mal à la tête, never Ma tête est mal. Also keep avoir for symptoms: Je suis fièvre is wrong, J'ai de la fièvre is right.

What will the doctor and the pharmacist say?

Learn to understand these short orders, in the polite vous form: Ouvrez la bouche. — Open your mouth. Respirez fort. — Breathe deeply. Prenez deux comprimés matin et soir. — Take two tablets morning and evening. At the pharmacy, ask: Je voudrais quelque chose pour la toux. — I would like something for a cough.

Mini dialogue

- Bonjour docteur, j'ai mal au ventre depuis hier.
- Vous avez de la fièvre ?
- Oui, un peu. Et j'ai mal au cœur.
- Prenez ce médicament et buvez beaucoup d'eau.

Which number do you call in an emergency?

15 SAMU médical	112 Europe toute urgence	18 pompiers feu, accident	17 police vol, danger
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Free emergency numbers that work from any phone in France.

Culture note

In France you can book a general practitioner (le médecin généraliste) by phone or online, and you show your carte Vitale at the visit. The consultation is partly reimbursed by national health insurance.

Zoé's tip

Point to the spot and say Ça fait mal ici. — It hurts here. Then add the French name when you know it. A doctor will always understand a gesture plus a few right words.

Key points to remember

- Être malade describes the whole state; avoir mal à points to one spot.
- À merges with the article: au (le), aux (les), but à la and à l'
- Many symptoms use avoir, not être: j'ai de la fièvre, j'ai froid, j'ai chaud.
- 15 calls the SAMU (medical emergency), 112 is the European number, 18 the firefighters, 17 the police.
- A pharmacy (green cross) can advise you and sell medicine; a prescription is an ordonnance.

Telling the Doctor Where It Hurts: frequently asked questions

How do you say "I have a headache" in French?

Say J'ai mal à la tête. The pattern is avoir mal à plus the body part, so it works for the back (au dos), the teeth (aux dents) or the throat (à la gorge).

What is the difference between je suis malade and j'ai mal?

Je suis malade means you are sick in general. J'ai mal à... says exactly where it hurts. A doctor often hears both: first the general state, then the precise pain.

Which number do you call for a medical emergency in France?

Call 15 for the SAMU, the medical emergency service. The European number 112 also works from any phone and connects to the right service. Firefighters are 18 and police 17.

Why do you say au dos and not à le dos?

French always merges à with le into au and with les into aux. Feminine nouns keep à la, and a noun starting with a vowel takes à l'.

How do you ask for medicine at a French pharmacy?

Say Bonjour, je voudrais quelque chose pour la toux or give your prescription, l'ordonnance. The pharmacist will explain how many tablets to take and when.