

Back Pain

Physiotherapy & Occupational Therapy

The prevention of infection is a major priority in all healthcare and everyone has a part to play.

- Please decontaminate your hands frequently for 20 seconds using soap and water or alcohol gel if available
- If you have symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting, cough or other respiratory symptoms, a temperature or any loss of taste or smell please do not visit the hospital or any other care facility and seek advice from 111
- Keep the environment clean and tidy
- Let's work together to keep infections out of our hospitals and care homes.

Introduction

Eight out of 10 people will experience an episode of back pain at some point in their life. It is common for some people to experience regular episodes of back pain. However, it is important to remember although back pain can be very scary and painful, it is rarely serious, as your back is strong and robust. Most back pain will normally resolve without any treatment within six to 12 weeks.

Common Causes

A number of factors have been associated with back pain. These include:

- Sprain or strain, for example, lifting something awkwardly or something that is too heavy for what you are physically used to doing
- Prolonged static postures
- A sudden increase or decrease in your normal activity or exercise levels
- Following a period of increased stress, worry or low mood
- Following a period of poor sleep, fatigue or feeling run down
- Other lifestyle factors such as being overweight and smoking
- A flare up of longstanding back pain
- Other conditions

Common Symptoms

These include:

- Pain in your lower back area which may travel into your buttocks, thighs or hips
- Stiffness after a period of rest or reduced movement, for example, first thing in the morning, prolonged standing, getting up from a chair or out of bed
- Difficulty moving, for example, bending, lifting, walking or just changing position
- Disturbed sleep

You may experience constant or intermittent (come and go) symptoms, that are aggravated by certain activities and reduced by others.

What can I do to help it?

- In the first few days after an onset of back pain, changing or reducing your usual activities may help. However, there is strong evidence that keeping active and gradually returning to all your usual activities and exercise will help you recover
- It is normal to experience some pain during your recovery, but it does not mean you are causing harm or damage to your back
- Try to stay at work or return as soon as you are able. Your employer, GP or health practitioner will be able to advise on how to return to your normal work duties

Try some of these self-help tips to aid your recovery:

- Apply a heat or icepack whichever you find most helpful to the painful area – for up to 15 minutes. Never apply heat or ice directly to the skin
- A short course of simple pain medication as advised by your pharmacist or GP may help reduce pain and allow you to move more comfortably
- Keep moving. Regular movement and exercise is safe and helpful for back pain. It is important to build up gradually – the exercise or activity you enjoy most, is likely to help your recovery
- If sitting causes pain and your job involves long periods of sitting, regular positional change may be helpful
- Good sleep habits and managing stress may help you cope better with your pain

10 Facts you should know about back pain

BACK FACTS

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1. Persistent back pain can be scary, but it's rarely dangerous

Persistent back pain can be distressing and disabling, but it's rarely life-threatening and you are very unlikely to end up in a wheelchair.



2. Getting older is not a cause of back pain

Although it is a widespread belief and concern that getting older causes or worsens back pain, research does not support this, and evidence-based treatments can help at any age.

3. Persistent back pain is rarely associated with serious tissue damage

Backs are strong. If you have had an injury, tissue healing occurs within three months, so if pain persists past this time, it usually means there are other contributing factors. A lot of back pain begins with no injury or with simple, everyday movement. These occasions may have contributions from stress, tension, fatigue, inactivity or unaccustomed activity which can make the back sensitive to movement and loading.



4. Scans rarely show the cause of back pain

Scans are important, but only for a minority of people. Lots of scary-sounding things can be reported on scans such as disc bulges, degeneration, protrusions, arthritis, etc. Unfortunately, the reports don't say that these findings are very common in people without back pain and that they don't predict how much pain you feel or how disabled you are. Scans also often change, and most disc prolapses shrink over time.

5. Pain with exercise and movement doesn't mean you are doing harm

When pain persists, it is common that the spine and surrounding muscles become really sensitive to touch and with movement. The pain you feel during movement and activities reflects how sensitive your structures are – not how damaged you are. So, it's safe and normal to feel some pain when you start to move and exercise. This usually settles down with time as you get more active. In fact, exercise and movement are one of the most effective ways to treat back pain, and having a health-professional coach you through the process can be helpful.



6. Back pain is not caused by poor posture

How we sit, stand and bend has not been shown to cause back pain even though these activities may be painful. A variety of postures are healthy for the back. It is safe to relax during everyday tasks such as sitting, bending and lifting with a round back – in fact, it can be more efficient!



7. Back pain is not caused by a 'weak core'

Weak 'core' muscles do not cause back pain, in fact people with back pain often tense their 'core' muscles and suck their belly in during activities as a protective response. This is like clenching your fist after you've sprained your wrist. Being strong is important when you need the muscles to switch on, but being tense all the time isn't helpful. Learning to relax the 'core' muscles during everyday tasks can be helpful.



8. Backs do not wear out with everyday loading and bending

The same way lifting weights makes muscles stronger, moving and loading make the back stronger and healthier. So activities, like running, twisting, bending and lifting, are safe if you start gradually and practice regularly.

9. Pain flare-ups don't mean you are damaging yourself

While pain flare-ups can be very painful and scary, they are not usually related to tissue damage. The common triggers are things like poor sleep, stress, tension, worries, low mood, inactivity or unaccustomed activity. Controlling these factors can help prevent exacerbations, and if you have a pain flare-up, instead of treating it like an injury, try to stay calm, relax and keep moving!



10. Injections, surgery and strong drugs usually aren't a cure

Spine injections, surgery and strong drugs like opioids usually aren't very effective for persistent back pain in the long term. They come with risks and can have unhelpful side effects. Finding low-risk ways to put you in control of your pain is the key.



This infographic is a summary only. Please consult the full text for clarification and supporting references.

O'Sullivan P, Caneiro JP, O'Sullivan K, Lin I, Bunzli S, Wernli K, O'Keeffe M. Back to Basics: 10 facts about low back pain. BJSM. 2019

When should I seek medical advice?

Call your GP surgery if:

- Your pain is getting worse
- You have tried the self-help tips for three to four weeks and your symptoms have not improved
- You have any of the following symptoms:
 - An unexplained onset of back pain accompanied by a history of Tuberculosis, HIV, cancer or rheumatoid arthritis
 - Feeling unwell with your back pain and have a fever or significant sweating that is keeping you awake at night
 - Feeling unwell with your back pain and have a history of cancer, loss of appetite or unexplained weight loss

There are occasions, where you may have a combination of back and leg pain. These symptoms can be distressing, but don't necessarily require medical attention.

When to seek immediate medical advice

Cauda Equina Syndrome is an extremely rare but serious back condition. It can cause permanent damage and disability. It is important to seek immediate medical advice if you have a combination of the following symptoms:

- Pain in both legs accompanied by weakness and/or a loss of feeling / pins and needles
- Loss of feeling / pins and needles between your inner thighs or genitals
- Numbness in or around your back passage or buttocks
- Altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- Increasing difficulty when you try to urinate
- Increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of urine
- Loss of sensation when you pass urine
- Leaking urine or recent need to use pads
- Not knowing when your bladder is either full or empty

- Inability to stop a bowel movement or leaking
- Loss of sensation when you pass a bowel motion
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Loss of sensation in genitals during sexual intercourse

Do I need an X-ray or scan?

- X-rays or scans are not usually required to diagnose back pain
- X-rays or scans are not able to tell us how much pain you are experiencing. They often show normal age-related changes and often this does not change how you manage your pain
- X-rays and scans best used where a serious injury (for example, a broken bone) or conditions such as cancer, infection or cauda equina syndrome are suspected

Why exercise?

It is important to get the back moving early in order to gain mobility, strength and return to normal function. Early exercise can have a positive influence on tissue healing and reduce the potential for joint and soft tissue stiffness.

Back exercises

These are suggested exercises and are to be performed within comfortable limits. If you have any concerns about any of the exercises, please seek medical advice.

Resting positions

Try lying on your back with the head supported and the knees bent. This position offloads the spine.



Alternatively, lie on your back with the head supported and pillows under the knees.



If side lying is more comfortable, place a pillow between the knees



1. Lie on the floor or a firm bed, on your back. Bend your knees and put the feet flat on the floor. Press your lower back into the floor to allow your bottom to begin to lift, then press your bottom down to allow the back to arch away from the floor. All the movement should be in your lower back. Repeat 10 times, two to three times per day.



2. Lie on the floor, or a firm bed. Knees and feet together, feet flat on the floor. Allow the knees to drop first right and then left, keeping the upper body still. Repeat 10 times, two to three times per day.



3. Lie on your back on the floor or a firm bed with your knees bent and feet flat. Bring both knees up towards the chest, hold the knees and squeeze them gently towards the body. The movement is slow and the pressure gentle. Lower the feet back down to the floor, knees bent. Repeat 10 times, two to three times per day.



4. Lie on your front on the floor or on a firm bed. Legs and bottom relaxed, put your hands under your shoulder palms on the floor. Push through your hands to arch the back as far as you can keeping the legs and bottom relaxed. Lower back down, repeat 10 times, two times per day.



5. Lie on your back, knees bent and feet on the floor, hip distance apart. Engage the tummy and squeeze the buttocks. Lift the pelvis and bottom off the floor, hip, knee and shoulder all in a diagonal line. Hold the position for a count of Four, continuing to squeeze the buttocks then lower slowly to the starting position. Repeat 10 times, two to three times per day.



6. Sit on a chair toward the front of the seat. Feet firmly on the floor, hip width apart. Arms outstretched. Ensure the chair is stable. Lean forward to take the weight onto the feet and come up into standing position. Do not allow the knees to come together as your move into standing. Once in standing, begin to bend the knees again and lean slightly forward to allow the bottom to stick out and sit back down onto the front of the seat. The knees should remain apart throughout. The movement is slow and controlled. Repeat 10 times, two to three times per day.



Gradually

- Return to your normal activities
- Resume hobbies and sports

If you are unsure of when to progress your exercises, or you have any concerns about your injury please use the PHIO self-referral platform or scan the QR code below.



Do I need a fit note?

- If you're off work sick for seven days or less, your employer will normally ask you to complete a self-certificate for sick leave as soon as you return to work
- If you're off work sick for more than seven days your employer will normally ask for a fit note (or Statement of Fitness for Work) from your GP
- You can read more information here <https://www.nhs.uk/common-health-questions/caring-carers-and-long-term-conditions/when-do-i-need-a-fit-note/> (opens in new window)

Useful websites and resources

- Facts about back pain 10 facts about back pain <https://www.pain-ed.com/blog/2017/04/12/10-facts-about-back-pain/>
- Patient Stories behind the 10 back pain facts every person should know <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puj06WIs1pM>
- Facts about posture and back pain Posture and Pain: Infographic <https://www.pain-ed.com/blog/2019/08/02/postureinfographic/>
- 10 facts about exercise and back pain <https://www.pain-ed.com/blog/2018/02/13/10-facts-about-exercise-and-back-pain/#:~:text=10%20facts%20about%20exercise%20and%20back%20pain%201,is%20the%20one%20you%20enjoy%20...%20More%20items>
- Back pain - Separating fact from fiction <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dISQLUE4brQ>

Accessing information and support to make healthy lifestyle choices

Online support:

Exercise

- <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/?tabname=exercise-tips>
- <https://www.nhs.uk>conditions>nhs-fitness-studio>

Sleep

- <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/10-tips-to-beat-insomnia/>

Diet

- <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/start-the-nhs-weight-loss-plan/>

Emotional well being

- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/>

English

If you need information in another way like easy read or a different language please let us know.

If you need an interpreter or assistance please let us know.

Lithuanian

Jeigu norėtumėte, kad informacija jums būtų pateikta kitu būdu, pavyzdžiui, supaprastinta forma ar kita kalba, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

Jeigu jums reikia vertėjo ar kitos pagalbos, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

Polish

Jeżeli chcieliby Państwo otrzymać te informacje w innej postaci, na przykład w wersji łatwej do czytania lub w innym języku, prosimy powiedzieć nam o tym.

Prosimy poinformować nas również, jeżeli potrzebowałiby Państwo usługi tłumaczenia ustnego lub innej pomocy.

Punjabi

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਰੂਪ ਵਿਚ, ਜਿਵੇਂ ਪੜ੍ਹਨ ਵਿਚ ਆਸਾਨ ਰੂਪ ਜਾਂ ਕਿਸੇ ਦੂਜੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ, ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਦੁਭਾਸ਼ੀਏ ਦੀ ਜਾਂ ਸਹਾਇਤਾ ਦੀ ਲੋੜ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

Romanian

Dacă aveți nevoie de informații în alt format, ca de exemplu caractere ușor de citit sau altă limbă, vă rugăm să ne informați.

Dacă aveți nevoie de un interpret sau de asistență, vă rugăm să ne informați.

Traditional Chinese

如果您需要以其他方式了解信息，如易读或其他语种，请告诉我们。

如果您需要口译人员或帮助，请告诉我们。