

# Back Pain

Back pain affects nearly all of us at some point in our lives and is rarely serious. It is so common, you could think of it as part of living.

Most people make a full recovery and you can do a great deal to help yourself. This leaflet aims to show you how.

If you take control of the pain you will get better faster and feel better sooner.

Most people with back pain make a rapid recovery within a few weeks and only require reassurance, advice and support to stay active.

## Evidence based back care

Much of what has been written about back pain offers confusing and, in some cases, misleading advice.

This leaflet aims to give you the best available information based on scientifically research-based evidence.

You will get better faster if you follow the advice listed here:

- Take simple painkillers to help manage the pain
- Put on an ice pack or heat pad to help bring down the pain
- Your back is designed to move. Stay active
- Stay working if possible
- Seek out advice from your GP or Physiotherapist, if you can't get back to normal activities quickly
- You can often benefit from physiotherapy
- Read this leaflet. Being informed helps reduce stress and anxiety
- Think positively. 95% of all back pain gets better
- What you do for yourself is what helps you get better
- Remember hurt does not necessarily mean harm.

## So, what is back pain?

The understanding of back pain is rarely helped by detailed investigations. X rays and MRI scans are not usually necessary and can sometimes give misleading information.

In fact, evidence shows that these methods for dealing with back pain can get in the way of a speedy recovery and may even exaggerate your pain feelings.

The truth is that all we can ever say with conviction is that some pain sensitive structures are being stimulated and your brain is interpreting these as pain.

- It is a passing problem that usually recovers
- It likes movement. Those who stay active get better faster
- It is usually helped by a positive attitude
- It is usually pain coming from the normal working parts of your back that are not functioning as they should
- It is usually only due to your back not moving and working properly. Getting your back to move and work properly again helps your body to recover naturally.

# What to do if you get back pain

## Stay active if you can

Your back likes movement. Try to keep working or participating in your normal activities as these will usually help you to recover faster. You may need to make temporary changes to how you work. Ask your employer to help you with this.

A Physiotherapist can help with guidance on exercises and how to stay active. They can also help you with advice on other matters such as:

- Avoid chairs that increase your pain, get up at regular intervals
- Make sure your work-station is arranged to suit you so avoiding strain
- Take breaks when driving. Ensure your seat is supportive
- Think about what you are lifting and carrying. Split the loads. Get help

- Think about asking others to help about the house with chores
- Continue with your sport if you can. You may need to do less or vary it and avoid repetitive activities
- If possible experiment with different beds in the house if sleeping is a problem. Change the mattress if you think that may help. Use a pillow between your knees, or under your side. Again try different things to see what helps.

## Control the pain

Use painkillers or anti-inflammatories. You'll probably have one you know that works for you or if not ask your GP or pharmacist for one they recommend. Controlling the pain means you will move more normally and thereby get better faster.

Follow the recommendations and advice on the packet. Remember these medicines can take time to make a

difference. Give them that time to work. You may need to take anti-inflammatories for a week or two.

Control the pain and you will get better faster.

## Heat or cold

You may get some relief from placing a cold pack on the affected area. If you do not have a cold pack, try a bag of crushed ice or frozen peas. To avoid frostbite and assist the transfer of the cold, wrap the pack in a damp tea towel and leave it on for 15 to 20 minutes. Alternatively, if you prefer heat, use a towel-wrapped hot water bottle. Either method helps to reduce pain and reduce muscle tension so it is a matter of preference.

## Massage and relaxation

Massage can help. It often feels good and acts by stimulating the skin, which eases the pain and lessens tension. Relaxation techniques can help tackle fear and anxiety that is often produced in acute pain.

## Manipulation

Assessment of your problem by a Physiotherapist will direct treatment to movement problems. They might use mobilising techniques to help restore normal function to your back. Improvement should be seen within a few sessions.

## Other treatments

Research is ongoing in this area and you may have therapies that have worked for you in the past. As long as they help you to stay active they will be beneficial.

## Advice and education

This is one the most important aspects.

Physiotherapists help to teach you self-management skills. These can reduce anxiety and tension that pain may cause and thereby reduce your pain by reducing your anxiety.

Your Physiotherapist will be skilled in assessing your problem and treating the physical causes of your individual symptoms.

They are experts in rehabilitation and can advise you on different strategies to reduce pain and increase activity levels. They will provide specific physical exercises to help with this. They will individualise exercise programmes to bring in all aspects of the rehabilitation process so that it is as effective as possible.

Your self-management programme of understanding the pain and your specific home exercise routine where appropriate, will provide the best treatment package for you.

Physiotherapists are experts in rehabilitation.

### Remember

Back pain is rarely due to anything serious. However if you have back pain that is not getting better quickly or you are unwell with it then you should see your GP.

There are very rare times when symptoms occur that mean you must contact a doctor immediately. These are:

- Problems with passing or controlling your urine
- Numbness or pins and needles in the saddle area between your legs
- Numbness, pins and needles or weakness in both legs
- Unsteadiness on your feet.

Remember: these symptoms are **very** uncommon.

### Stopping your pain becoming chronic

It is how you feel and what you do about your back pain that is most important in whether your problem becomes chronic. So to prevent this happening try to:

- Believe that your pain is not due to anything serious
- Believe that hurt does not mean harm
- Accept the advice and reassurance that you are given
- Stay active
- Be in charge of your pain
- Be positive.

Try to get back to work as soon as possible. The evidence shows that by doing this you will prevent long-term problems. The day you stop work because of back pain gives you a 10% chance of still not being back at work a year later.

Stay active if you can.

## Remember: help yourself to health

### How?

- By reading this leaflet
- By knowing that you can make a difference to your pain
- By getting moving
- By keeping at work
- By controlling your pain
- By knowing you are going to get better
- By knowing that pain is an experience and you can influence it.

If you need a little extra help, speak to your Physiotherapist or GP.

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