

Zurich Rehabilitation Managing Back Pain



What is back pain?

Back pain is a common complaint which will affect 4 out of 5 of us at some point during our lifetime.

Approximately half of people who experience one episode of back pain will experience another episode within a couple of years; however this is normal and not a cause for alarm...

- Back problems are common and rarely due to any serious injury or disease
- Hurt does not equal harm

Your spine is one of the strongest structures in your body, designed to give flexibility and stability.

Remember...

- Back pain is very common and rarely due to any serious problem
- Hurt does not mean harm
- Keeping fit and active reduces your risk of recurrent back pain
- Resting too much will make your back pain worse
- It is important to keep active, but modify your activity levels as required
- It is important to address any worries and negative beliefs about your back pain for a good recovery
- A healthcare professional such as your GP or a physiotherapist can give you further support to help manage your back pain if required

Red flags

There are a few occasions when back pain requires further investigation:

- Severe back pain which is not made better or worse by movement
- Difficulty passing urine or opening your bowels (this is usually being unable to empty fully, or being incontinent)
- Altered sensation or numbness in your genitals, anus or upper inner thighs
- Numbness, pins and needles or radiating pain in both legs
- Difficulty walking – being severely unsteady on your feet

It is important that you seek urgent medical attention should you develop any of these symptoms alongside your back pain, but please do not worry about this list as serious problems arising from back pain are extremely rare.

If you have none of the above symptoms you can be confident that your back pain is not due to anything serious, and you can follow the guidance in this booklet to help you get better.

Causes

It is not always possible to identify the cause of back pain – although this may be frustrating, it is actually good news and shows that your back pain is not due to any serious damage.

Often back pain is caused by:

- Soft tissue injuries such as a pulled (sprained) ligament or pulled (strained) muscle
- Poor posture
- Lack of exercise (deconditioning)
- Sudden changes in activity levels (either a sudden increase **or** decrease)
- Stress and low mood

Soft tissue injuries

The spine is made up of bones (vertebrae), muscles and ligaments, and it is common to sustain an injury to any of these structures, for example after lifting awkwardly.

Soft tissue injuries usually cause mechanical lower back pain, which is where your pain is made better or worse by movement; however trying to avoid the pain by not moving is a bad idea and will only make your pain worse in the long run - you will get weaker, stiffer, be able to do less of the activities you enjoy and as a result of all of these you will have more pain.

Poor posture

As previously mentioned your spine is designed to give flexibility – so let it move! It is common to experience back pain when you are in one position for prolonged periods.

Although we all know we should try not to stoop, for example when sat at a desk, did you also know that if you sat upright in the ‘perfect posture’ for prolonged periods this would also cause you pain? Your back doesn’t like being still for too long, so don’t let it!

Managing stress and anxiety

Although back pain can be alarming, especially if you have never experienced it before, it is important that you stay positive. Worrying about your pain will make things worse, as previously discussed it will increase your muscle tension and production of your stress hormones, both leading to more pain.

People who stay positive, and work on addressing their worries tend to recover quicker – people who worry or catastrophise are unlikely to make a good recovery.

A health care professional will be able to give you further guidance on managing some of your pain behaviour and worries such as catastrophising and fear avoidance using cognitive behavioural strategies, but you can try to manage your worries and anxieties better with relaxation techniques such as deep breathing exercises and imagery.

Physiotherapy

Physiotherapy can be beneficial in helping you to better manage your back pain if you have not been able to return to your normal activities through self-management strategies alone.

‘Hands on’ treatments such as massage, manipulations and acupuncture may have some short term benefit for some people, but should only be used alongside exercise and good self-management. A physiotherapist will be able to tell you what treatments are best for you, and guide you with your combined treatment plan.

Traction treatment and corsets or braces should no longer be advised, as evidence shows these are not effective in managing back pain, and keeping your back rigid by wearing a corset or brace can in fact worsen your back pain long term by making your joints stiffer and your muscles weaker.

Lack of exercise

Staying active and doing regular exercise keeps your body healthy, supple, releases your body’s own natural chemicals that reduce pain and helps you to prevent further damage. A lack of exercise can result in stiffness and weakness, meaning the ability of your body (and back in particular) to cope with the daily demands placed upon it is reduced, increasing your chances of injury and back pain.

Sudden changes in activity levels

Although your back likes movement, it is very common to start feeling back pain when you change your activity levels. You may think this is only if you increase your activity levels, but it is not – it also commonly occurs when you start doing less.

There is no reason why you cannot do more of any activity, but if you increase too much too soon you will likely experience pain, because your body is not used to it.

Likewise if you suddenly reduce or stop doing an activity you will likely experience pain as your body has got used to doing more.

This is the same for work – if you have a physical job, but outside of work you have a sedentary lifestyle, the chances of you experiencing back pain are higher, as your back will not like the sudden changes (ups and downs) in activity levels.

Stress and low mood

There is a strong link between stress, low mood, depression and back pain. Your pain is very real and nobody is saying that pain is in your head; however we now know that pain is caused by a combination of factors including emotional:

- When you are stressed your body releases a hormone called cortisol – this increases the sensitivity and activity of the pain cells in your body, literally causing you to feel pain. This can occur with or without any physical injury.
- When you are feeling stressed or anxious your body tends to be in a heightened state of alertness – this means that your muscles are tensed and prepared to spring into action if needed; however when this occurs over long periods of time it causes pain in the muscles themselves, in addition to the joints and nerves they surround – it is very common to experience back pain, neck pain, with or without pins and needles or tingling in the arms and legs, due to tense muscles being caused by stress and anxiety.
- With low mood disorders such as depression, all of the above can occur. Also, your motivation can be reduced leading you to do less and as a result you get stiffer, weaker and feel more pain.

For heat treatments apply the heat pack or hot water bottle to the painful area, or soak in a warm bath, for up to 20 minutes. You may find it beneficial to use heat before doing any exercises.

Safety advice

- Do not apply ice packs directly on to your skin
- Do not rest with your weight on top of the ice pack – this could increase the risk of an ice burn
- Do not rest with your weight on top of the hot water bottle – this could increase the risk of burns if the hot water bottle were to burst

Painkillers

Up-to-date evidence has shown that paracetamol alone is not effective for managing back pain; however it can be effective when used in conjunction with non-steroidal anti-inflammatories such as ibuprofen and prescription naproxen, or weak opioids if these have been ineffective. Please discuss this with your pharmacist or GP for guidance on what is best for you.

Your GP may consider prescribing muscle relaxants, such as diazepam, if they feel your back pain is being caused by painful muscle spasms.

Cold and hot treatments

Cold treatments (such as an ice pack) can be helpful during the early stages (up to 48 hours) to reduce the pain and any local inflammation in the back. After this stage, heat treatment (such as a hot water bottle or warm bath) is usually better, as they will relax the muscles in your back, reducing your pain and allowing you to move a bit easier (again reducing your pain).

For cold treatments ensure your skin is protected by wrapping the ice pack in a damp cloth or towel before applying to the area for no longer than 5-10 minutes (but no longer). Ensure you monitor your skin for signs of an ice burn – if you develop any blisters or redness that does not settle within 30 minutes, discontinue use and see your GP.

But I have a slipped disc!

Back pain is rarely caused by 'slipped discs' or 'trapped nerves'; however even when it is, this usually resolves with conservative management alone – recent guidelines based on up-to-date evidence shows us that surgery for back pain alone is rarely required or effective.

But I need an MRI!

Although you may think you require imaging such as an MRI scan or x-ray to diagnose your back pain, you do not. Imaging rarely detects serious causes for back pain and can be misleading, causing more harm than good through causing unnecessary worry and as such are no longer routinely recommended or offered. A common finding on imaging is 'degeneration' – this is nothing to be worried about and is in fact a normal finding associated with normal age-related changes, such as wrinkles and grey hair. Studies have actually proven that findings from imaging are not always related to pain – did you know that 30% of 20 year olds with *no pain at all* will have discs bulging on an MRI of their back? Food for thought...

What you do to manage your back pain is far more important than trying to find an exact diagnosis...

How can I manage my back pain?

Although most back pain usually improves within a few weeks or months, it is important that you know what you can do to ideally avoid developing, or better manage, chronic or persistent pain. There is no 'one size fits all' solution for back pain, and no pain control method is a quick fix. What we do know is that a combined approach is best to help get you active again...

Avoid over-resting

It can be tempting to want to rest when you have back pain, particularly when movement makes your pain worse. Years ago 'bed rest' was a prescribed treatment for back pain. Well as tempting as it may be we now know that this is in fact one of the worst things that you could do to try to manage your back pain.

Prolonged rest for back pain leads to:

- **Stiffer joints**
- **Weaker muscles**
- **Reduced fitness and exercise tolerance**
- **Low mood**

...all of which will increase your back pain and make it much more difficult to get back to your normal life. So what can you do about it?

Keep moving!

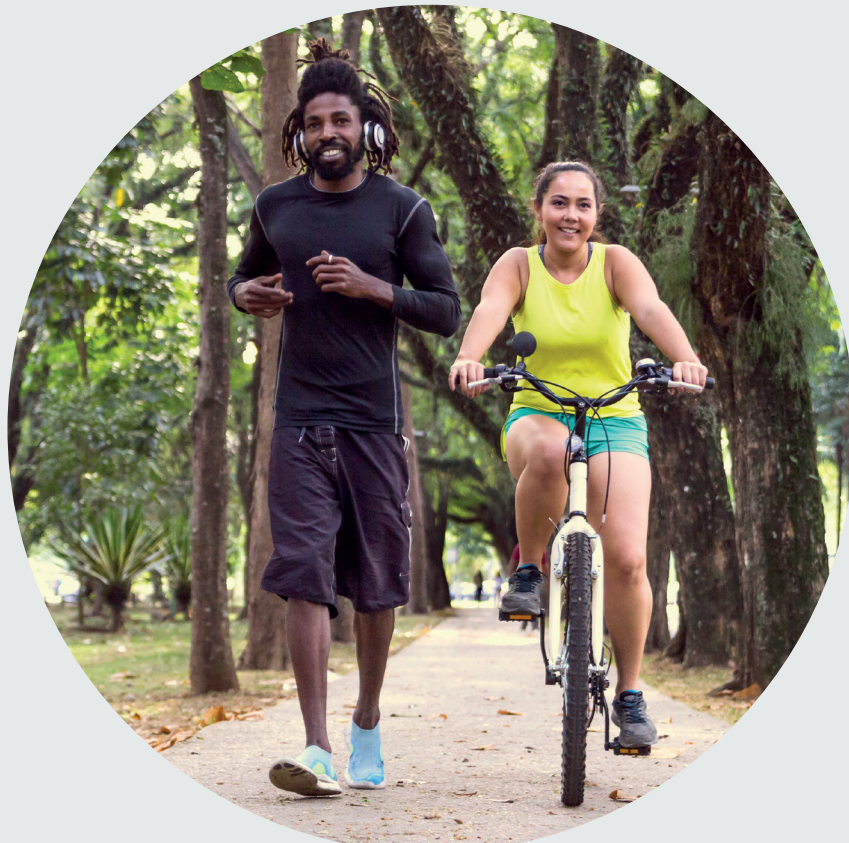
Even when you have back pain you can still try to do most of your daily activities or hobbies – just pace yourself by not doing things for too long, and changing position regularly.

Keep an activity diary

It can sometimes be difficult to know how much you can do. Some people find it helpful to do an activity diary.

Keep a brief diary every day of what activities you have done and how long for (such as washing up for 15 minutes, walking for 30 minutes) along with a pain score out of 10 (0 being no pain at all and 10 being the worst pain imaginable). This will allow you to track your pain levels each day, identify what is causing your symptoms to flare up, and modify your activities accordingly. For example if your pain score is 2/10 and you do 30 minutes of walking which increases your pain to 6/10, you might want to try doing 15-20 minutes of walking next time to avoid flaring your pain so much.

It is important to note that it is normal to have some discomfort when you gradually increase your activity levels after a period of back pain, but what you want to avoid is flaring your pain so much that you have to rest for long periods to recover. You want to be able to gradually increase your activity levels rather than be up and down or 'all or nothing' with what you do.





Resources used to write this booklet:

Arthritis Research UK

The At Work Partnership

The Back Book (TSO)

BackCare (the National Back Pain Association)

The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP)

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) Low Back Pain guidelines

NHS Choices

The Royal College of General Practitioners

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