

Managing Back Pain



Growing a
healthier workforce

Introduction

Back pain is very common, affecting up to 8 out of 10 adults in the UK. It can often be extremely painful and limit day to day life. It may cause hot, burning, shooting or stabbing pains in your back and legs and you may also get pins and needles.

Most episodes of back pain improve within 6 to 8 weeks and sometimes in as little as just a few days. In some people symptoms go away and in others they can grumble on.

‘Managing your symptoms well and quickly returning to all normal activities is the key to a good recovery’.



What is causing your symptoms?

When you see a health professional they will examine you and ask you some important questions. Once they are confident there is no serious problem they will often diagnose you with ‘non-specific’ lower back pain. ‘Non-specific’ means that there is not one structure or cause to your symptoms so you often do not require an x-ray or scan.

‘Over 99% of lower back pain has no serious cause’.

Up to 40% of people with low back pain also have related leg pain - sciatica.

Leg pain tends to be the most troublesome symptom and there may be no back pain at all. For some people sciatica improves in 6 to 12 weeks. 50% of people with acute sciatica report some improvement within 10 days and 75% report improvement within 4 weeks.

Sciatica refers to symptoms associated with the sciatic nerve. Sciatica is caused by an irritation of a sciatic nerve which runs from the lower part of the spine, down the back of the leg, to the foot. Although the nerve is sensitised, typically there's nothing wrong with the nerve itself and the symptoms are temporary and mainly due to local inflammation.

The best way to manage your symptoms

Stay active

When your back is sore, it is common to be worried about making it worse. Remember your back may be sensitive but it remains very strong. It is important to understand that pain does not equal harm and that doing more activity will actually aid your recovery.



Stay at work

Staying at work has been proven to help back pain and is associated with quicker recovery rates. In some cases this is not possible and you may require short term adjustments of your work duties. If this is the case please contact Occupational Health and the Staff Physiotherapy Service for further support.

If you are absent from work due to back pain it is important to have an achievable, timely return to work plan. Early return to work assists your rehabilitation and reduces the chances of developing on-going symptoms.

‘Doing things that you value the most helps you recover quicker from your flare up, such as walking the kids to school, going to work and enjoying hobbies’.

Analgesia

Keeping your pain well controlled is an important part of managing your recovery. Taking regular medication does not mask pain, it helps you to stay active and will speed your recovery. If you feel your pain is poorly controlled then you should contact a pharmacist or GP, they will be able to give you advice about which medication to use.

Exercise

Exercise is very good for your back. All forms of light exercise (including walking, cycling, and swimming) are strongly linked with healthy backs. So if you normally exercise regularly try to build things back up. If you aren't currently very active, choose something you think you would enjoy and aim to continue exercising in the long term after your current back pain episode has eased.



Golden rules

- Keep moving even if slowly at first
- Keep living and working normally
- Avoid bed rest during the day
- Exercise
- Don't sit down for too long
- Stay active and remember to re-introduce activities like heavy lifting gradually
- Don't be afraid to take simple painkillers

Can I do anything else?

There are a number of other things you can do to help your recovery. All of these things have been shown to improve the outcome of patients with lower back pain:

- Reduce stress/anxiety.
- Stop smoking.
- Get a good night's sleep.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Try not to stay in one resting position for too long.

When should I seek further assistance?

If your symptoms are continuing and you feel you are not improving, you should discuss your symptoms with your GP or physiotherapist who will be able to advise you on appropriate treatment.

There are also a number of rare symptoms that can be associated with back pain and need immediate attention. If you have any of the following you should contact a doctor straight away:

- Bladder or bowel problems, including difficulty passing or controlling urine.
- Altered sensation, including pins and needles or numbness, around your front (genitals) or back passage.
- Any unexplained recent weight loss or feeling generally unwell with your back pain.
- Constant pain that never eases, is getting worse and is there 24 hours a day.
- Recent unsteadiness on your feet.

Follow up

If you are struggling to manage at home or work, you can access further support from the staff physiotherapy service.

Useful Links

Video -The truth about low back pain (Keele University):

www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-cBtPSf0Hc (4mins)

Free app - NHS24 app for MSK conditions:

Iphone:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/nhs-24-msk-help/id556064114?mt=8>

Android:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=uk.co.isai.nhs24msk>

North of England back pain handout:

<http://www.noebackpainprogramme.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Regional-Back-Pain-Pathway-Patient-Information-1st-Attendance-PIL1-ver3-Nov15-301115.pdf>

Managing your back pain - a guide for patients based upon the latest evidence:

http://www.pain-ed.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/THO-S-ManagingYourBackPain_booklet_offset-printed-professional-April-2013-Final.pdf

15 things you may not know about back pain

<http://www.enablingselfcare.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Back-pain-article-Independent-20-07-2015-2.pdf>

We're here to help

If you need further information or advice, please contact the staff physiotherapy service telephone 01670 564010, internal extension 36010.