



Physiotherapy Department

Managing Acute

Back Pain



Back Pain:

Back pain is very common and affects most of us at some point in our lives. About eight out of ten people will experience low back pain and we know that it is one of the most common reasons why people visit their GP. Although it is common, it is very rare that back pain is caused by a serious disease. Most cases of back pain get better over a period of weeks.

The best advice is to keep active, do normal activities as much as possible and return to work as soon as you can.



Causes of Back Pain

- **Non-specific- the cause in the vast majority of people**

It is often impossible to find a precise cause for low back pain. Less than 1 in 100 people have a serious problem. It can be caused by an injury or sprain, but most of the time it isn't and may be due to poor posture, lack of exercise or stiffness. You may have heard your doctor, physiotherapist or nurse describing your back pain as 'non-specific' or 'simple' back pain. This means that after your examination, the clinician is not concerned that you have a serious medical condition. This is the type of back pain that is likely to get better over the next few weeks as you gradually return to normal activities and work.

- **Sciatica**

This is far less common and affects less than 1 in 20 people with low back pain. It is most often caused by pressure or irritation of nerves as they come out of the lower back. The symptoms include pain, numbness and tingling that spread down the leg, sometimes reaching the calf or foot. Most people do recover from sciatica but often it takes longer than with non-specific back pain.

- **Rare Causes**

In less than 1 in 100 cases back pain has a more serious cause. These include infection, fracture, tumour or inflammation.

Helpful Information

Investigations

Investigations such as X-rays and scans are rarely needed as they don't help the clinicians to diagnose your problem and they don't provide a cure.

The doctor, physiotherapist or nurse will be able to diagnose your problem by taking a full history of your difficulties and an examination of your back and legs.



Painkillers

It is advisable to take painkillers; this can be guided by your GP or pharmacist. It is best to take them regularly rather than taking them now and again. This will allow you to continue with day-to-day activities more comfortably.

Exercise

A gradual return to exercise and general activity is very helpful for your recovery. Regular exercises may help also to prevent the back pain from returning. Try to set a new goal everyday- for example, a walk around the house on one day and a walk to the shops the next day.





Activity

Try not to rest in bed: pace your activities. Pay attention to your posture and your back position when lifting. Try not to slouch when sitting and keep your back straight when lifting. You are more likely to stay pain-free in the future if you keep active rather than resting a lot

Sleep

You may want to consider taking a painkiller just before bedtime. Some people say that a small pillow in between their knees helps them to sleep.



Work

If you have a job, try to return to work as soon as possible. It is safe to return to work before you are pain-free. Talk to your GP and your employer about this at an early stage to assist your speedy return to work. The longer you stay off work, the more likely you are never to return. Research tells us that you are more likely to improve quickly by getting moving and getting back to work as soon as possible.

Remember:

Pain doesn't equal harm. Most people recover quickly and have no lasting problems. Sometimes people do become worried or depressed. Please see your GP if you think this is a problem for you.

Low Back Movement Exercises

Exercise 1:



Lie on your back with your knees bent. Next, arch your low back away from the bed and then flatten gently. Your pelvis should tilt forward and back during the movement. Move through a comfortable range of motion. Repeat x 10 times.

Exercise 2:



While lying on your back, gently draw your knee into your chest and hold for 20 seconds. Repeat x 3 times on each side.

Exercise 3:



Lying on your back with your knees bent; gently move your knees side-to-side. Repeat x 10 times.

Exercise 4:



While lying on your back with both knees bent, slowly lower one knee to the side and back again. Your pelvis should not move. Repeat x 5 times on each side.



The Key Messages to Remember

- Back pain is a condition with a high recovery rate.
- Back pain does not mean your back is damaged- it means it is sensitised.
- Your back is one of the strongest structures of the body and it is very rare to do permanent damage to your back.
- Back pain can occur due to awkward movements and postures, muscle tension, inactivity, lack of sleep, stress, worry and low mood.
- Movements may be painful at first – like an ankle sprain – but they will get better as you get active.
- Moving or exercising your back will help your back pain settle. Your back will get stronger with movement.
- Sitting in one position for prolonged periods may cause your back to become stiff. Change position regularly.
- Don't completely avoid painful activities; try altering the way you do them.