

Chronic Low Back Pain



This leaflet has been produced by Senior Physiotherapists working at the Queen Victoria Hospital NHS Foundation Trust. It has been designed to give you accurate up-to-date knowledge on how to manage your low back pain at home. The information should help you to improve your posture and function in everyday activities. The information is given in good faith for general purposes only and you should always obtain and follow the advice of your doctor or physiotherapist concerning individual needs.

Acute pain

Acute pain is usually a warning to us that something is wrong with our body, or an urgent message to prevent us from harming ourselves. For example if we were to twist an ankle, the pain would prevent us from running around and damaging it more. As a result, the ankle would have time to heal. This type of pain will usually settle within days or a few weeks.

Chronic pain (pain that lasts more than three months)

If acute pain is not well controlled, and movement/activity is avoided, the affected joint may stiffen causing yet more pain. This pain is not a useful pain and becomes a problem in its own right. This is known as chronic pain. It is not caused by direct injury.

Pain tolerance

The more we focus on pain, the worse it feels. Pain is also affected by our mood, e.g. if we are feeling low about something then pain generally feels worse. Pain tolerance is about how much pain we expect to feel and how much we are prepared to put up with it.

Overcoming pain is a matter of learning how to control it. This requires a positive attitude as well as knowledge.

Useful facts

- Your spine is one of the strongest parts of your body.
- Structural damage is uncommon.
- Back pain is rarely caused by serious disease.
- Movement will help your back recover from minor injury (after all, that is what it is designed for).
- Bed rest for more than a day or two is usually bad for your back (stiffness may begin causing chronic pain).
- If you are physically fit, you are less likely to suffer back pain, or will recover more quickly.
- If you smoke you are more likely to get chronic back pain due to delayed healing.
- Those people who cope well are the ones who stay active and get on with their life despite the pain.
- 18 out of 100 people will have back pain at this moment.
- 70 out of 100 people have had back pain within the last six months.
- Pain is often caused by everyday activities.

Pain in the lower back

The lower back (or lumbar spine) is likely to give you pain because it bears the entire weight of the upper body, plus any load carried, plus the stress of bending. The lower back is made up of different structures, all of which may give you pain. Sometimes pain can even be referred into the leg and down to the foot.

Degeneration / 'wear and tear'

Degenerative changes are most common in the facet joints and discs of the lumbar spine. Discs may have narrowed, and facet joints may have worn and become rough. These changes may show up on x-ray, but don't always give pain. Degenerative changes are very common and should not be cause for concern.

Posture

Sitting

- Sit in a supportive, comfortable chair. Avoid low, soft chairs or sofas.
- Keep hips higher than knees.
- Your neck should be in a relaxed, upright position, not poking forward. If sitting at a desk, your elbows should be at desk height.
- Adjust your seat to allow your lower back to maintain its lumbar curve. You might like to use a rolled up towel in the small of your back.
- If you are at a desk, your chair should be pulled right underneath.
- Avoid twisting movements. If you work at a desk, the telephone, bin and keyboard should be in easy reach.
- When driving on long journeys make sure that you take frequent breaks. Get out of the car and take a short walk. Try arching your back.

Remember, your spine likes movement. Try and change position every 20 – 30 minutes!

Resting and sleeping

There is no right or wrong position for sleeping. When lying down you should aim to keep the spinal curves in alignment.

Most back pain sufferers find that a medium firm mattress is best (not too hard or soft). If you are intending to buy a new one, always test it out first. Your pillows should also help maintain good neck curve alignment.

Lifting

- Keep a hollow in the small of your back whenever possible.
- Stand close to the load with your feet shoulder distance apart, with one foot in front of the other.
- Bend your knees and hips, not your back.
- Keep whatever you are lifting close to your body.

Housework

- Keep spine in correct alignment.
- When vacuuming, keep the cleaner close to your body and use short strokes. Change hands often.
- Store cleaning products where easily reached.
- When cleaning low down e.g. bath or toilet, try to kneel rather than bend.
- When making the bed, if possible, walk around to each side rather than leaning over.

Gardening

- Use lightweight, long-handled tools.
- Kneel on a soft pad when weeding or sowing, DON'T bend and strain.
- When mowing, keep the mower close to your body and use short strokes.
- Avoid twisting. Keep feet facing in the direction that you are moving.

“Do’s and don’ts” when you have back pain

Do’s

- Stay active e.g. cycling, walking.
- Keep up daily activities (avoiding heavy ones).
- Start gradually and do a little more each day.
- Return to work as soon as possible. You may need to do lighter duties.
- Aches and twinges are normal from time to time.
- Take your pain killers when you are in pain, or preferably before you are in pain.
- For short term relief of pain, use heat or cold over the painful area for five to ten minutes e.g. frozen peas wrapped in a damp flannel, or a hot water bottle (take care when filling these and do not use boiling water) or take a hot bath.

Don'ts

- Don't stay in or give up things that you enjoy.
- Don't listen to other people's horror stories. They are often exaggerated.
- If you smoke, try at least to cut down as smoking delays the healing process.

Bed rest is bad for backs

If you stay in bed for more than a couple of days:

- Your muscles and joints weaken
- You get stiff (which will add to your pain)
- You may get depressed
- Pain feels worse
- It is harder to get going again

Being active will help with your pain - Staying active is important.

Exercise will:

- Strengthen your muscles and joints
- Keep you supple, reduce stiffness, and decrease pain
- Help you lose weight
- Make you feel good
- Release natural chemicals in your body that will reduce pain

Even if your back is sore, or you are new to exercise, you can make a slow and gradual start. It will involve effort and time, but the benefits are certainly worth it. Always check with your GP if you have been inactive for a long time or you have any kind of medical condition that may affect your ability to exercise.

Please do not try someone else's back exercises, as they may not be suitable for you.

When to seek help

- When no position eases the pain.
- When the pain spreads away from the spine and into the leg, or is accompanied by pins and needles or numbness.
- When pain worsens following an accident or fall.

(If you develop any of the following you must consult with your GP immediately)

- If you have difficulty passing urine.
- Numbness around the back passage or genitals.
- Numbness, pins and needles or weakness in BOTH legs.
- Unsteadiness when walking.

Getting back to work

Research has shown that there are many advantages in getting back to work sooner rather later. It is easy to lose confidence if you are off for too long. Your employer should allow you to return part time to start with, or at least allow you time out to see your physiotherapist if needed, If your job involves physical activities such as digging or lifting, you should consider alternatives. Make sure you plan the task and be aware of potential problems so that you can minimise them. Break up the tasks, allowing time for stretching in between. Stand up and stretch your back or go for a short walk rather than slumping down in an easy chair.

Preventing recurrences

These are usual with low back pain but it does not mean that you must stop everything that you are doing. To minimise the chances of recurrence, continue with the exercise programme that your physiotherapist has given you. Make a commitment to long-term exercise such as cycling, swimming or walking as mentioned earlier in this leaflet. Keeping your muscles strong and your joints flexible is the best way to keep low back pain at bay.

Following are some exercises to get you going. If you find that any of these exercises increase your pain then stop doing them immediately. If they help, try and do them twice a day.

If you have any queries regarding this information or the exercises mentioned, please contact us:

Physiotherapy department
Tel - 01342 414004

Please ask if you would like this leaflet
in larger print or an alternative format.

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Personal Exercise Program

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Lie on your back with legs bent and feet together. Pull stomach up and in to flatten back gently onto the floor.

This is a contraction of the deepest stomach muscle. It DOES NOT involve sucking in your breath or moving as you normally would when working your stomach muscles.

Assist this contraction by pulling up and in with the pelvic floor muscles. It may help to imagine that you are trying to stop yourself from passing water mid-flow.

Do not allow your back to flatten to hard onto the floor.

Hold this contraction with minimal effort.

Remember to breathe throughout.

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HOLD FOR 10 SECONDS
RELAX FOR 10 SECONDS
REPEAT 10 TIMES



Lying on your back with head supported on a pillow.

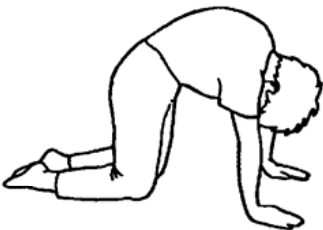
Bend both knees up with feet flat on the floor.

Slowly roll the knees one way being careful to keep your upper trunk still.

Return to the start position and repeat to the other side.

REPEAT 10 TIMES

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In the crawling position, arch your spine upwards while letting your head relax between your arms.

REPEAT 10 TIMES

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Lying on your back with knees bent and feet flat on the floor.

Lift your pelvis and lower back gradually (vertebra by vertebra) off the floor.

Hold for 5 seconds.

Lower down slowly returning to the starting position.

REPEAT 10 TIMES