

# Low back pain

## Information and advice

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This information is designed to supplement the advice given by your doctor, and is written by physiotherapists based on the latest medical advice.

### Back pain

Back pain is very common, and most people recover very quickly - often within six weeks. Our backs are designed to keep moving, so resting in bed tends to make the problem worse.

Most back pain is not due to any serious disease. However, if you develop any of the following symptoms, consult your doctor immediately:

- pins and needles in both legs
- numbness between the tops of your legs or genital region
- difficulty passing urine or incontinence of bowels or urine
- increasing weakness in your legs
- erectile dysfunction in association with back pain

It is normal to get back pain more than once in your life but this does not mean it is a serious problem. Most people with backache do not have any damage to their spine.

#### During an acute attack there are a number of things you can do to help control the pain:

- take painkillers regularly for the first day or two. You may need to take them for a few weeks. Be guided by your doctor or pharmacist.
- modify normal activity until the acute pain eases.
- applying ice or heat to the area may help; try either an ice pack wrapped in a damp towel or alternatively place a warm water bottle (in a cover) on the painful area. Use either of these regularly for up to 20 minutes each time. Do not use if you have any impairment of your skin sensation.

#### Sleeping

Use whatever position is most comfortable and use pillows to support you if necessary. Try a firm base under the mattress or put the mattress on the floor. Don't stay in bed too long.

#### Sitting

Use an upright chair and try using a rolled towel in the small of your back for comfort. It may help to sit with your back against the back of the chair and your feet on the floor. Get up and move regularly (ideally every 20 minutes).

#### Bending

When you have acute back pain it may help to limit activities that involve bending forwards. It may be easier to kneel for activities such as making the bed.

## Driving

Take regular breaks on long journeys. During a break, walk and stretch your back. Gentle neck and shoulder movements will help ease tense muscles and stiff joints. Adjust your seat and use a rolled towel in the small of your back for comfort/support. Do not poke your chin forward or grip the wheel too tightly.

## Fitness and activity

Physically fit people generally get less back pain and recover faster. Swimming, cycling or short walks are good ways of keeping your fitness, even while you still have backache. After an acute attack, build up your activities slowly over several days and once back to full activity, keep going!

## At work

Stay at work if possible, otherwise return to your job as soon as you can, even if you still have some discomfort. If standing for a long time, it may help to put one foot on a foot rest.

## In the office

Make sure your chair fits you and supports your back. Change positions frequently and stretch. Arrange desk, files, computer and telephone, so that you do not have to twist to reach them.

## Manual work, gardening and housework

Modify activity early on but get back to normal as soon as possible. Have more frequent breaks during activities. When lifting, it may help to use your legs more.

## Exercises

Your back is designed for movement. The sooner you get back to normal activity, the sooner your back will feel better. Here are some exercises to help you do this. Start gently with the exercises below two or three times a day.

1. Pull one knee in to your chest until a comfortable stretch is felt in the lower back and buttocks. As it gets easier, straighten out the other leg.



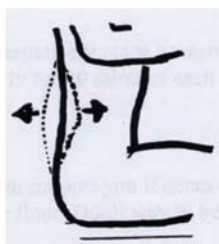
Repeat five times each leg

2. Lying on your back with knees bent, roll knees from side to side keeping the upper trunk on the bed.



Repeat five times each side

3. Sit up straight with your bottom at back of the chair. Push your lower back into the back of the chair and then hollow the lower back away from the chair. Keep your feet flat on floor.



Repeat five times regularly

4. In the standing position, slide your hand down the outside of your legs:



(a) to the right and  
(b) to the left.

Repeat five times each side

If any of these exercises make your symptoms worse then reduce the frequency or stop them and consult your doctor. If after four to six weeks your backache is not improving, go back and see your doctor. A delay in recovery rarely means that it is a serious problem, it's more likely that you may need some extra help to deal with it.

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