

Low back pain

About the condition

Back pain is very common and is generally not caused by a serious illness or condition. It often improves with time.

Causes of back pain

Common causes of back pain include:

- muscle strain
- joint pain
- irritation of the nerves in your back
- arthritis of the spine (spondylosis)



Treating low back pain

There are a few things you can do to help manage your pain and speed up your recovery.

- **Keep moving** – Your back is designed to move. Staying active and continuing your usual daily tasks helps speed up recovery.
- Use a **pillow between your legs** to make sleeping more comfortable.
- **Pain relief** – Over-the-counter anti-inflammatory medicine such as ibuprofen may help.
- **Ice or heat** – Use an ice pack in a damp towel or a covered hot water bottle on the painful area for up to 20 minutes. Repeat as needed. Avoid if you have reduced skin sensation or skin damage.
- **Exercises and stretches** – Gentle back exercises can help ease pain (see suggestions on the next page).
- **Avoid long bed rest** – Resting too much or avoiding movement can slow recovery and make stiffness worse.
- Gradually **re-introduce your usual activities** in a way that feels manageable for you.

Red flag symptoms

Seek urgent medical help by contacting NHS 111, going to A&E, or making an emergency GP appointment if you have:

- new bladder or bowel problems, such as difficulty starting, leaking, or not feeling the need to go
- numbness or tingling around your bottom, genitals, or inner thighs (“saddle area”)
- severe or quickly worsening leg weakness, or difficulty walking
- loss of sexual function that feels sudden or unusual

Exercises

Complete these gentle exercises little and often to help reduce spinal stiffness and other symptoms. They may be uncomfortable, but they shouldn't significantly increase your symptoms.

1. Knee roll stretch

Repetitions: 1-20 **Frequency:** 2 times daily (morning and afternoon)



Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet on the floor. Place your arms out to the sides for support.

Slowly let both knees roll to one side until you feel a gentle stretch. Bring them back to the middle and repeat.

Keep your knees together throughout the movement.

2. Knee to chest stretch

Repetitions: 1-20 **Frequency:** 2 times daily (morning and afternoon)



Lie on your back.

Gently pull both knees toward your chest, holding behind your thighs. Bring them in until you feel a comfortable stretch in your lower back. Hold the position.

3. Bridge

Repetitions: 1-20 **Frequency:** 2 times daily (morning and afternoon)



Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet on the floor.

Squeeze your buttocks to lift your hips until your body forms a straight line from shoulders to knees.

Lower your hips slowly and repeat.

4. Side bent stretch

Repetitions: 1-20 **Frequency:** 2 times daily (morning and afternoon)



Stand tall with your arms by your sides or crossed over your chest. Slowly slide one hand down your thigh as you bend sideways.

Return to the middle, then repeat on the other side.

When to seek help

If you feel these exercises are making your symptoms worse, take a break. You can also speak to your GP for further help. This doesn't mean it's anything too serious. It may be that you need some extra help to deal with the symptoms, and you may be referred to a physiotherapist.

 berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/physiotherapy