
Back Pain Management Programme

The back leaflet; help yourself

The new approach to back pain

Back pain has always been very common and we have learnt a great deal about it. There has been a revolution in thinking about back care, and we now approach it in a different way.

Most people can and do deal with back pain themselves most of the time. This leaflet gives you the best and most up-to-date advice on how to deal with it, avoid disability and recover quickly. It is based on the latest research.

Back facts

- Back pain or ache is not normally due to any serious disease.
- Most back pain settles quickly, at least enough to get on with normal life.
- About half of people with back pain will have it again within a couple of years. This does not mean that it is serious. Between attacks most people return to normal activities with few, if any symptoms.
- It can be very painful and you may need to reduce your activities for a time. But resting for more than a day or two usually does not help and may do more harm than good.
- Your back is designed for movement. The sooner you get back to normal activity the sooner your back will feel better.
- The people who cope best are those who stay active and get on with their life despite the pain.

So keep moving - back pain need not cripple you unless you let it!

Causes of back pain

Your spine is one of the strongest parts of your body. It is made of solid bony blocks joined by discs to give it strength and flexibility. Strong ligaments reinforce it and large powerful muscles surround it, both of which protect it. It is surprisingly difficult to damage your spine.

- Most people with back pain do not have any damage in their spine.
- Very few people with backache have a slipped disc or trapped nerve, but even these usually get better by themselves.
- Most x-ray findings in your back are normal age changes - just like grey hair.

Most back pain comes from the muscles, ligaments and joints in your back. They are simply not moving and working as they should. In most people we cannot pinpoint the exact source of the trouble. This can be frustrating not knowing exactly what is wrong, but in another way it is good news - you do not have any serious disease or damage to your back. You can think of your back as 'out of condition'.

Stress can increase the amount of pain you feel. Tension can cause muscle spasm and the muscles themselves can become painful. Learn to reduce the effects of stress by relaxation.

People who are physically fit generally get less back pain, and recover faster if they do get it.

So the answer to back ache is to get your back moving and working properly again as soon as you can. Get back into condition and physically fit.

Rest or active exercise

It is time to stop bed rest for backache. Bed rest is bad for backs. You might need to have a day or two in bed at the start, but more than this is not good for you because:

- Your bones and muscles get weaker.
- You get stiff and lose physical fitness.
- The pain feels worse.
- You get depressed and it is harder to get going again.

Even when your back is sore, you can make a start at exercise without putting too much stress on your back, such as walking, cycling, and swimming. These all get your muscles and joints working, and they make your heart and lungs work - a start to physical fitness.

When you start to exercise you may need to build up gradually over a few days or weeks. Different exercises suit different people. Find out which one suits you and your back best. No one pretends exercising is easy, athletes know that when they start training, their muscles ache. This does not mean they are doing any damage. Painkillers and other treatment can help to control the pain and let you get started. The longer you put it off the harder and more painful it will be. There is no other way, rest or work through your pain to recovery.

Control of pain

There are many treatments that can help control back pain enough for you to get active. These may not completely remove the pain or cure your back. It is up to you to get your back working again.

Pain killers

Paracetamol or Aspirin are the simplest, safest and often most effective. Take two tablets every four to six hours, or you can use anti-inflammatory tablets like Ibuprofen. Take them regularly, do not wait until you pain is out of control. It may be worth checking this with your doctor or pharmacist first, especially if you take any other medication.

Heat or cold

In the first 48 hours you can try a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a towel for 15minutes at a time. Others prefer a hot water bottle or shower.

Spinal manipulation

It is best carried out in the first six weeks and is safe when done by a qualified professional, for example, a Physiotherapist, Osteopath or Chiropractor.

Stay active

You can do most daily activities if you think about them first. Try not to stay in one position for more than 20 minutes. Try and do a little more each day. If you have a bad day, which is normal, try and modify your activities but stay active and at work. Remember that too much bed rest is bad for you.

Some ways to help your pain

Avoid

Lifting

Know your own strength. Lift what you can handle. Always lift and carry close to your body. Bend your knees and make your legs do the work. Don't twist your back, turn with your feet.

Lifting without thinking.

Sitting

Use an upright chair. Try a folded towel in the small of your back. Get up and stretch every 20-30 minutes.

A low, soft chair. Lack of back support. Sitting for a long time.

Standing

Try putting a foot on a low box or stool. Have your work surface at a comfortable height.

Long periods in one position.

Driving

Adjust your seat from time to time. Try a folded towel in the small of your back.

Long drives without a break.

Activity

20-30 minutes walking, cycling or swimming every day. Gradually increase physical activity.

Sitting around all day. Not exercising and being unfit.

	Some ways to help your pain	Avoid
Sleeping	Some people prefer a firm mattress or try boards beneath your mattress.	Staying in bed too long.
Relax	Learn how to reduce stress. Use relaxation techniques.	Worrying and being tense.

Warning signs

If you have severe pain that gets worse over several weeks instead of better, or if you are unwell with back pain, you should see your doctor.

Here are a few symptoms that are very rare, however if you do have back pain and suddenly develop any of these symptoms you should see a doctor straight away:

- Difficulty passing or controlling urine.
- Numbness around your back passage or genitals.
- Numbness, pins and needles or weakness in both legs.
- Unsteadiness on your feet.

Back pain is rarely due to any serious disease, so don't let the list worry you too much.

Conclusion

General backache is not a serious disease and it should not cripple you unless you let it. The important thing now is for you to get on with your life. How your backache affects you depends on how you react to the pain and what you do about it yourself.