

Patient Information

Lower Back Pain

Introduction

This leaflet provides you with information on how to manage and hopefully ease your back pain.

Having back pain can be worrying. Even a minor back strain can be very painful and it's natural to think that something dreadful might have happened.

Your spine is made of solid bony blocks (known as vertebrae) joined by shock absorbing discs that give it strength and flexibility. This is then reinforced by strong ligaments, and surrounded by muscles which provide protection. Most back pain comes from the parts of your back which allow you to move such as the muscles, ligaments, and small joints.

Back facts

- Most back pain is not due to any serious disease.
- The pain usually improves within days or a few weeks, at least enough to continue with your daily life.
- About half the number of people who get back pain will go on to have further pain within a couple of years. Between episodes of pain people are usually able to return to normal activities with little or no pain.
- How you respond to your back pain in the early stages will affect your long-term recovery.

Dealing with an episode of back pain

Research shows that it is important that you find ways to control your pain so you are able to continue with as many of your usual daily activities as possible (though avoiding lifting).

Pain Relief – it is safe to reduce the pain to get active but limiting your activities because of pain can cause long term problems. Your body will not let you do any harm. Paracetamol may help and anti-inflammatory medicines such as ibuprofen can be effective. Consult your GP or pharmacist before taking any anti-inflammatories as you may need medicine to protect your stomach or an alternative type of medicine.

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Heat therapy – can be used for short-term pain relief and to relax muscle tension. A hot water bottle, a bath or shower can help.

Massage - many people find gentle rubbing eases the pain and relaxes muscle spasm.

Manipulation – is safe if done by a qualified professional such as an osteopath, chiropractor or physiotherapist. You may feel the benefit within a few sessions, but it is not a good idea to continue treatment for more than a couple of months.

Physiotherapy – advice, further assessment and exercises can be provided by a physiotherapist. You can self-refer to the Therapy Department for more information (the contact details are at the end of this leaflet).

When back pain may be serious

Once in a while back pain may indicate something more serious. You should seek medical advice from your GP or NHS 111 if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Recent physical injury to your back or neck such as falling onto a hard surface or traffic accident.
- High temperature – over 38°C.
- Loss of bladder or bowel control (incontinence).
- Inability to pass urine or prolonged constipation.
- Back pain which travels to the chest area or top of back.
- Numbness of the buttocks and back passage.
- Unexplained weight loss.
- Abnormal sensation (pins and needles) travelling down the legs.

You should contact your GP if your symptoms persist longer than 3 to 4 weeks.

Activity is good

Exercise is beneficial not only for your skeletal and muscular system, but your digestive system and also for your mood.

Even when your back is painful, gentle movement and exercise can help relieve your symptoms. Everyone's back pain is different and often it becomes clear which movements or activities aggravate the pain and which help to relieve it.

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Below are a few activities recommended for becoming more active in the management and prevention of back pain:

- Walking
- Swimming
- Using an exercise bike or road cycling
- Yoga/ keep fit classes

Remember to stand correctly – good posture is important to prevent back strain. Stand upright, tucking in your bottom and abdomen.

Lifting can often be an aggravating factor so try to avoid it where possible. If lifting, bend your hips and knees, keep your back straight and your arms and the object close to your body. Lift by straightening your legs.

Further information

If you have any concerns, please contact your GP, Therapy Department or alternatively call NHS 111 for advice.

Therapy Department

Gloucestershire Royal Hospital
Tel: 0300 422 8527

Cheltenham General Hospital
Tel: 0300 422 3040

Website: www.gloshospitals.nhs.uk/our-services/services-we-offer/physiotherapy/how-can-i-see-physiotherapist/

NHS 111

Tel: 111

NHS Choices

Website: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/back-pain/>

Backcare Charity Information

Website: www.backcare.org.uk

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Making a choice

Shared Decision Making

If you are asked to make a choice, you may have lots of questions that you want to ask. You may also want to talk over your options with your family or friends. It can help to write a list of the questions you want answered and take it to your appointment.



Ask 3 Questions

To begin with, try to make sure you get the answers to three key questions if you are asked to make a choice about your healthcare.

1. What are my options?
2. What are the pros and cons of each option for me?
3. How do I get support to help me make a decision that is right for me?

These resources have been adapted with kind permission from the MAGIC Programme, supported by the Health Foundation* Ask 3 Questions is based on Shepherd HL, et al. Three questions that patients can ask to improve the quality of information physicians give about treatment options: A cross-over trial. Patient Education and Counselling, 2011;84: 379-85

<https://aqua.nhs.uk/resources/shared-decision-making-case-studies/>