

Introduction

This document is written for people with back pain and will give you practical tips on how to deal with pain. Most people are able to recover from back pain and help themselves reduce pain. There is a lot you can do for yourself to improve your situation.

All of the information in this document is based on the latest scientific research.

What is causing my back pain?

- Your spine is a very strong, robust structure which is difficult to injure
- Most people with back pain do not have any serious damage to their spine
- Less than 5% of people with back pain will have a damaged disc or damage to their nerve
- Even if you do have a damaged disc this will likely heal in 6-12 weeks
- 95% of people have 'non-specific back pain' – pain which cannot be attributed to a single 'cause'. Although this can be difficult to understand, it can also be reassuring to know that there is nothing seriously wrong with your back
- Movement and exercise will help reduce back pain
- Stress is very linked to back pain. If you are stressed, it's important to find a way to reduce stress (relaxation exercises, breathing exercises, meditation or mindfulness are some good options)
- Building up strength and moving regularly are the best treatments for the majority of back pain

Getting the green light to move

Very rarely is back pain a signal for something more serious going on (in less than 1% of people). If you have seen a GP, physio, or other health care specialist about your back pain and they did not refer you on for further tests they have ruled you out of this category.

However, if you're concerned about your back pain, please go to see a health specialist. If they say you are fine to exercise, you can proceed with the advice given here.

Rest versus movement

It is very important to stay active if you have back pain. As you begin to increase your activity you might experience days of discomfort, but you should know that you are on the path to getting stronger!

Why rest is not advised for back pain:

- It might actually worsen your pain
- Your general fitness reduces
- Muscles become weaker
- Bones become weaker
- You become stiffer

- Your mood will likely become more negative
- The longer you avoid movement the more you might become afraid of movement

Why movement is important for back pain

- General fitness improves
- Muscles get stronger
- Bones become stronger
- Spine (and body) become more mobile
- Your mood will improve
- Movement reduces stress
- Exercise releases endorphins which reduce pain symptoms

The important thing to remember with getting movement is to gradually increase the amount of movement and activity you do on a daily basis.

Start walking, swimming, or cycling. Walking is one of the best ways to reduce back pain. Try going for a short walk every day. Slowly build up to taking longer walks, or multiple walks per day.

If you experience some pain as you start to exercise don't worry. This can be normal as you build up strength and stamina. A little bit of discomfort also should not discourage you from keeping active. Your body and your spine are designed to move!

Even if you have a day with more pain, it's important to keep your activity levels up. Try to stay consistent of a little bit of movement every day, multiple times per day.

You can also try doing some of the exercises below every day, eventually doing them a few times a day.

Exercises for back pain

Pelvic Tucks and Tilts

Lying on your back, have your legs bent and feet on the floor, hip width apart. Start with a small arch in between your lower back and the floor. Begin to tuck your pelvis under, bringing your pubic bone towards your navel, flattening the arch of your lower back into the floor. Then tilt your pelvis away from you, gently increasing the arch in between your lower back and the floor. Repeat 8-14 times.

Hip Rolls

Lying on your back, have your legs bent and legs and feet together. Start to rotate your pelvis and lower back to one side, keeping your upper back and both shoulder blades connected to the floor. Come back into centre. Alternate sides. Repeat 10-12 times (5-6 to each side)

Cat/ Extended Cat

On your hands and knees, with your hands under your shoulders and your knees under your hips. Tuck your tailbone under in between your legs, to create a rounded shape with the spine. Then send your tailbone away from you, arching into your back. Repeat 8-12 times.

Mindset around pain

Remember that the majority of people with back pain will get better. Often when we are in pain, we start to become anxious about what might be wrong with us or depressed about how back pain is affecting our life. This is normal, but it can be useful to notice and to question your beliefs around pain.

Common thoughts about pain:

- I'm never going to get better
- There must be something seriously wrong with my back
- If I move it might make my back pain worse

However, the latest research about back pain tells a different story. Pain is not necessarily a sign of any damage done to your back.

Hurt does not equal harm.

When we're in pain it's very normal to have negative thoughts about pain or to worry about what might be wrong with you, but often these thoughts can make the experience of pain worse.

Next time you have negative thoughts about pain try introducing some of the alternative thoughts below, which are based on scientific research.

Alternative thoughts to try when you're in pain:

- The majority of people with back pain get better
- There is nothing seriously wrong with my back
- Moving will make me feel better and more positive in general
- Hurt does not equal harm
- Movement and exercise are the best things for back pain

People who stay positive about their back and remain active are likely to get better.

What to do in an episode of acute back pain

Occasionally, you might have a bad episode of back pain. This is normal in the journey to recovery, and you should try to stay active if possible.

- Try not to panic – remind yourself that recurrent episodes are normal in the journey to recovery
- Practice a relaxation exercise

- Take painkillers if you find them helpful
- Heat or cold can be helpful in reducing pain
- If you absolutely need to rest, try to only do this for 24-48 hours, but regularly get up or move around to prevent your back from becoming stiff
- If you need to see your GP or a health specialist, book yourself in to see someone
- Remember hurt does not equal harm

Some other useful tips:

Moving – Regular movement is the key for maintaining a healthy back. Start with 15-20 minutes of walking a few times a week and gradually build up. You can also practice the exercises above every day.

Sitting – You can sit with a rolled up towel behind your lower back to keep the natural curves of your lower back present. Try not to sit for more than 20 minutes at a time. Regularly get up to stand or move around.

Standing – If standing for long periods of time aggravates your back try to avoid this while you build up strength. Walk around regularly.

Sleeping – You can try to sleep on your side with a pillow in between your knees. A firm mattress is good, not too hard and not too soft.

Driving – You can drive with a rolled up towel behind your lower back. Try to avoid long drives where you are not moving your back. Take regular breaks and wiggle around in your driver's seat!

Posture – Some people find it helpful to work on their posture to establish the natural curves of the spine, which you can practice in a Pilates class

When to seek medical advice

Remember, back pain is very rarely due to any serious conditions - even when the pain can be severe. However, there are some occasions where you should seek medical advice.

Here are a few rare symptoms but if you experience them you should go see a doctor:

- Numbness, pins and needles or weakness in both legs
- You are unsteady on your feet
- Unexpected changes in bowel or bladder functions
- You have numbness around your genitals or back passage
- You have severe pain which gets *worse* over a number of weeks

Don't let the above list worry you – remember that back pain is very rarely a sign of anything serious.

Important facts:

- Back pain is common but rarely a sign of serious damage or disease
- Pain does not necessarily mean you have damaged something
- Hurt does not equal harm
- Rest is not advised for back pain

- Stay active! Even if you have a bit of pain it's important to keep moving and building strength
- Your back pain and your general health will improve with regular exercise