

Back Pain

Back pain is common and ranges from mild to severe pain. Most episodes soon ease within 4 weeks and are not due to serious illness. Keeping active is the most important message along with painkillers if needed to keep your back moving. There are some exercises at the end of the leaflet.

What are the types of back pain?

Simple back pain accounts for 19 out of 20 cases. Simple does not mean mild back pain – the pain can be severe – just that there is no sciatica or serious cause. It may be caused by a stretch in a back muscle or a temporary problem with the joints in the back, but will usually improve within 4 weeks especially with painkillers and keeping the muscles moving.

Studies tell us the pain will be gone or improved significantly in $\frac{3}{4}$ of patients in 4 weeks and 9/10ths of patients in 6 weeks.

Sciatica means that a nerve coming from deep in the back is being pressed causing shooting pain along its path to the foot. This pain is made worse by moving, coughing or sneezing. There may be temporary tingling or numbness in the leg.

Spondylosis means arthritis in the back joints and wear and tear in the discs between the bones. This often causes more persistent back pain although some people have significant wear and tear without any pain.

Unusual causes are rare and your GP will be on the lookout for these if the symptoms are not typical or do not settle in the usual way. Examples are ankylosing spondylitis, bone disorders, tumours and infections.

How can I tell what type of back pain I have?

Most cases of low back pain that develop suddenly (acutely) are due to simple low back pain. Many people just 'get on with it' and treat it themselves - and indeed most get better quickly. However, if in doubt because the pain is unusual or long lasting, see your doctor for a check-over and advice.

Do I need any tests?

Your doctor will normally be able to diagnose simple low back pain or nerve root pain from the description of the pain, and by examining you. In most cases, no tests are needed. For example, x-rays or scans of the back are not helpful and do not show anything abnormal if you have simple low back pain. Also, if you have sudden onset sciatica, and symptoms begin to settle over the next few weeks, then no tests are needed.

Tests such as x-rays, blood tests or scans may be advised if sciatica pain persists or is severe, or if another serious cause of the pain is suspected.

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What are the treatments for simple low back pain?

Exercise and keep going.

This is the most important advice in this leaflet.

Continue with normal activities as far as possible, including work. This may not be possible at first if the pain is very bad. However, move around as soon as possible, and get back into normal activities as soon as you are able. As a rule, don't do anything that causes a lot of pain. However, you will have to accept some discomfort when you are trying to keep active. In the past, advice had been to rest until the pain eases. It is now known that this was wrong. You are likely to recover more quickly and are less likely to develop chronic (persistent) back pain if you keep active when you have back pain rather than rest a lot. Some exercises are suggested at the end of the leaflet to help.

Medication

If you need painkillers, it is best to take them regularly. This is better than taking them 'now and again' just when the pain is very bad. If you take them regularly the pain is more likely to be eased for much of the time and enable you to exercise and keep active. **Paracetamol** is often sufficient if you take it regularly at full strength. For an adult, this is 1000 mg (usually two 500 mg tablets), four times a day.

- **Anti-inflammatory painkillers.** Some people find that these work better than paracetamol. They include ibuprofen which you can buy at pharmacies or get on prescription. Other types such as diclofenac or naproxen need a prescription. Some people with asthma, high blood pressure, kidney failure, stomach problems or heart failure may not be able to take anti-inflammatories.
- **A stronger painkiller** such as codeine is an option if anti-inflammatories do not suit or do not work well. Codeine is often taken in addition to paracetamol. Constipation is a common side-effect from codeine. This may make back pain worse if you need to strain to go to the toilet. To prevent constipation, have lots to drink and eat foods with plenty of fibre.
- **A muscle relaxant** such as diazepam is sometimes prescribed for a few days if the back muscles become very tense and make the pain worse.

Physical treatments

Hot and cold packs often help to relax the muscles, as do rub on gels and even gentle massage. Some people visit a physiotherapist, chiropractor, or osteopath for manipulation and/or other physical treatments. Commonly suggested physiotherapy exercises are included at the end of the leaflet if you would like to try them at home. A referral to a physiotherapist for more hands on treatment is often suggested by GP's if the back pain fails to improve in 4-6 weeks.

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What are the treatments for back pain other than simple back pain?

Sciatica

In many cases, the treatment is the same as that described above for simple low back pain. Sciatica often eases and goes over a few weeks. Physical treatments such as spinal manipulation may provide some short-term comfort and hasten recovery in some cases.

Can further bouts of back pain be prevented?

Evidence suggests that the best way to prevent bouts of low back pain is simply to keep active, and to exercise regularly. This means general fitness exercise such as walking, running, swimming etc. There is no firm evidence to say that any particular 'back strengthening' exercises are more useful than simply keeping fit and active. It is also sensible to be 'back aware'. For example, do not lift objects when you are in an awkward twisting posture.

What back exercises should I do?

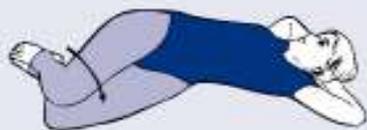
Exercise is **the most important way** that you can help yourself. Any form of continuing pain will mean that you stop moving so well. This leads to your muscles wasting and this will make your back weaker and more easily tired. So you need to restore the strength and flexibility in your back. The body needs strong back muscles to work as a shock absorber for jolts and knocks which are part of daily life.

References:

Low Back Pain in Adults, Patient information leaflet, www.patient.co.uk, accessed 11/11/08

Back Pain, Patient information leaflet, www.arc.org.uk, accessed 11/11/08

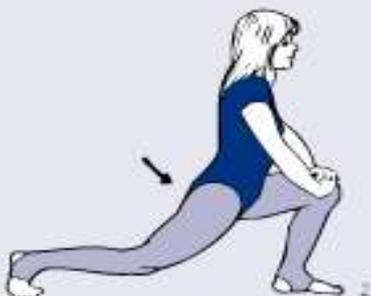
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NB: Upper knee should be directly above lower knee



1. Back stretch (stretches back muscles) Lie on your back, hands above your head. Bend your knees and, keeping your feet on the floor, roll your knees to one side, slowly. Stay on one side for 10 seconds. Repeat 3 times each side.



2. Deep lunge (stretches muscles in front of thigh and abdomen) Kneel on one knee, the other foot in front. Lift the knee up; keep looking forwards. Hold for 5 seconds and repeat 3 times each side.

3. One-leg stand – front (stretches front thigh) Steady yourself with one hand on something for support. Bend one leg up behind you. Hold your foot for 10 seconds and repeat 3 times each side.



4. One-leg stand – back (stretches muscles at back of leg) Steady yourself, then put one leg, straight, up on a chair. Bend the other knee in to stretch the hamstrings. Repeat 3 times each side.



5. Knee to chest (stretches muscles of bottom – gluteals) Lie on your back. Bring one knee up and pull it gently into your chest for 5 seconds. Repeat for up to 5 times each side.

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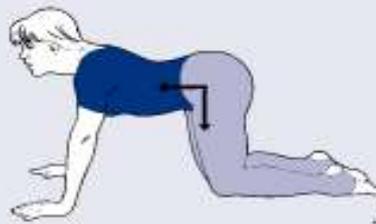
1. Pelvic tilt Lie down with your knees bent. Tighten your stomach muscles, flattening your back against the floor. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 times.



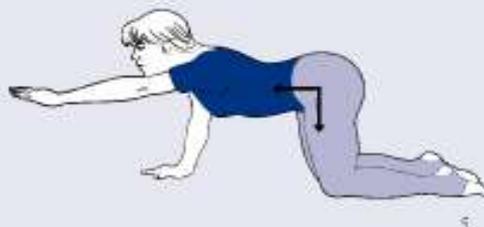
2. Stomach tone ('transverse tummy') Lie on your front with your arms by your side, head on one side. Pull in your stomach muscles, centred around your tummy button. Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 3 times. Build up to 10 seconds and repeat during the day, while walking or standing. Keep breathing during this exercise!



3. Buttock tone (gluteals) Bend one leg up behind you while lying on your front. Then lift your bent knee just off the floor. Hold for up to 8 seconds. Repeat 5 times each side.



4. Deep stomach muscle tone (stabilizes lower back) Kneel on all fours with a small curve in your lower back. Let your stomach relax completely. Pull the lower part of your stomach upwards so that you lift your back (without arching it) away from the floor. Hold for 10 seconds. Keep breathing! Repeat 10 times.



5. Back stabilizer Kneel on all fours with your back straight. Tighten your stomach. Keeping your back in this position, raise one arm in front of you and hold for 10 seconds. Try to keep your pelvis level and do not rotate your body. Repeat 10 times each side. To progress, try lifting one leg behind you instead of your arm.

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