



back
in control

A self-help guide to managing back pain and enabling recovery

The aim of this publication is to help people with back pain to begin to get 'back in control' of their symptoms. By following the advice in this publication most people with back pain can enable recovery and limit the amount of time and suffering back pain often brings to work and leisure.

In this booklet you will find information on:

Back Pain, Treatment, Medication, Work Issues, Further Investigations, Common Myths, Glossary and Downloadable Guides

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Introduction

The aim of this publication is to help people with back pain to begin to get 'back in control' of their symptoms. By following the advice in this publication most people with back pain can enable recovery and limit the amount of time and suffering back pain often brings to work and leisure.

Key facts to start

- The first three important steps to enable recovery are: take action, get advice, take pain relief
- Getting back to normal as soon as possible is the best way to aid your recovery
- Back pain is rarely due to any serious disease or damage
- Activity is better than rest
- Don't take back pain lying down

The questions in this booklet were asked by people who suffered back pain. The answers are based on the experiences of those who have successfully managed their symptoms, together with the best research and medical evidence.

Back Pain

Why did I get back pain?

Most people do not really know why. In Scotland 83% of people with back pain were unable to think of any actual cause for their symptoms¹. Back pain is very often due to a build up of different things. Examples might include working in awkward positions, sitting for prolonged periods or repeating tasks frequently without changing positions regularly.

What is causing my back pain?

Back pain is rarely due to any serious disease or damage.

Back pain can be felt in the lower back area often spreading into the buttocks. Sometimes back pain travels into your leg (sciatica). This type of pain is normally due to the sciatic nerve being irritated.

It is almost impossible to say exactly what is causing your symptoms. Often people ask:

- **How can I be so sore when I can't remember doing anything to cause it?**
- **Why is there nothing to see?**

The lack of a clearly defined cause can make back pain sufferers feel very frustrated. Most people would like a specific diagnosis for their symptoms.

How long will my back pain last

Thankfully, 90% of people suffering from acute back pain do recover within six weeks. This recovery is helped if you keep active, keep at work and try to do things as normally as possible, even though you may have to modify these activities at first.

If symptoms are not starting to improve within a week or so, you should consider contacting a physiotherapist or GP to begin treatment and rehabilitation.

Is my back pain something serious?

Back pain affects nearly everyone at some point in their life and is rarely due to any serious disease or damage.

If you experience any of the following, you need to contact NHS 24 as soon as possible.

- **Difficulty passing or controlling urine**
- **Numbness around your back passage or genitals.**

If you experience any of the following, you need to speak to your doctor as soon as possible.

- **Serious pain which gets worse over several weeks.**
- **Generally feeling unwell.**
- **Back pain that starts when you are ill with other problems such as rheumatoid arthritis or cancer.**
- **Your back problem doesn't settle after six weeks.**
- **Numbness, pins and needles, or weakness in one or both legs.**
- **Unsteadiness when you walk.**

How can I avoid further episodes of back pain?

Keep active...keep moving and begin to return to 'your' normal activity gradually.

It is a good idea to aim for 30 minutes of moderate activity a day, 5 days a week. That might sound like a lot, but 'moderate' activity can be anything that makes you slightly out of breath and increases your heart rate, like a brisk walk.

Visit www.ouractivenation.co.uk for lots of extra advice on how to become more active.

In most cases, back pain recovers in a few weeks but it is not uncommon for it to return. You can help things by trying to stay in control of your symptoms, try to follow any advice given by a health care professional or found in this publication or visit www.scottishbacks.co.uk.

Treatment for Back Pain

Don't take back pain lying down!

There is a lot you can do to help yourself recover. Get active. Take some pain relief. Get advice from a health care professional and follow the advice in this publication.

The longer you are off work with back pain, the greater the risk of chronic pain and disability, and the lower your chances of ever returning to work. So the sooner you get going, the better.

See a copy of the 'Staying Active with Back Pain. Guide on p13 of this publication'.

Follow these three simple steps to enable recovery

- **Take painkillers**
- **Keep active, even if you have to modify things at first**
- **Take action and get treatment and rehabilitation advice from your physiotherapist or GP if your back pain is not getting better.**

There are no specific exercises that help every person with back pain. However, some safe exercises have been produced to help keep you moving. Information on these simple exercises can be found via the PhysioTools link on the Scottish Backs home page at www.scottishbacks.co.uk.

Gradually returning to any sports or hobbies you may have is also a very important part of your rehabilitation. You may have to start gradually and modify activities to begin with. It will take time to slowly return to full fitness. Think of top footballers with injuries. Do they suddenly return from injury straight back to the first team playing 90 minutes at full pace? No. They gradually build up their activity levels bit by bit.

Do I need to see a doctor about my back pain?

Back pain affects nearly everyone at some point in their life but is rarely due to any serious disease or damage. Getting advice from your doctor can be useful to offer assessment, reassurance and prescribe appropriate medication for your pain if simple painkillers have not helped. They are also able to direct you to your local physiotherapy services.

Do I need to see a doctor about my back pain? *continued*

Not normally. If you follow the right advice and take the right medication, your back problem should improve over the next six weeks.

If you experience any of the following, you need to contact NHS 24 as soon as possible.

- **Difficulty passing or controlling urine**
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Will losing weight help my back pain?

There is no real evidence to show that losing weight helps back pain. What we know is that being more active helps reduce back pain as well as being good for your overall health and well-being, even if you are overweight.

Medication for my back pain

Should I take painkillers?

Painkillers can help you keep moving. However, it is important that if you are already taking medication for something else or have other health problems you **check with the pharmacist** at your local chemist before taking painkillers for your back problem. You can find your local pharmacist here www.nhs24.com/FindLocal

- You can use simple, over-the-counter painkillers (such as paracetamol) or anti-inflammatory medicines (such as ibuprofen) to help your pain. You can take both these medicines together.
- Always follow the instructions on the packet.
- You can only take two 500mg paracetamol every four to six hours, and no more than eight 500mg paracetamol in 24 hours. You should not take any more than this amount.
- You can only take three 400mg ibuprofen a day. You should not take ibuprofen if you have stomach problems such as ulcers, or have had a previous allergic reaction to ibuprofen. Always take ibuprofen with or just after food.
- If you have asthma, ibuprofen may make it worse, but if you have taken it before with no problems then you can safely take it again. If you are not sure, speak to your pharmacist.
- Take them regularly, not just when you are sore, for the next three to four days only.
- If you feel you still need pain relief after four days then speak to your pharmacist for advice.

Work Issues

When can I go back to work?

Generally, people recover faster and everybody benefits by staying at work or returning to work as early as possible, even if you have to carry out light duties at first. Back pain does not need to be completely gone before you can get back to work. Sore backs may be limiting at first, but it is still possible to do most normal work activities without putting too much strain on your back.

Discuss any worries you have about returning to work with your employer as soon as you can. For free and confidential advice on back pain and work, call the Healthy Working Lives Adviceline on 0800 019 2211, or visit Healthy Working Lives at www.healthyworkinglives.com or The Health and Safety Executive at <http://www.hse.gov.uk>

See 'Back Pain at Work' information sheet (page 14). This sheet has important information you can share with your employer.

How do I lift correctly?

Every lift has its own risks. Try and plan ahead before any lift. If you are in employment, discuss this with your employers. Lifting is not only related to work. You lift in many daily activities such as picking up your baby, shopping bags or gardening. More information on lifting and manual handling can be found at Healthy Working Lives <http://www.healthyworkinglives.com/advice/work-equipment/manual-handling.aspx> or from The Health and Safety Executive at <http://www.hse.gov.uk>

What about sitting?

Sitting without regularly changing positions can also cause problems. Being aware of your sitting posture can help reduce back pain problems. Information on computer workstations can be found at: <http://www.healthyworkinglives.com/advice/office-hazards/reception/workstation.aspx> and <http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/dse/>

Avoid sitting for prolonged periods and get up to move regularly. Remember these simple rules apply whether you are sitting at work or at play.

Further Investigations for back pain

Do I need an MRI scan?

MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) is a type of scan that is often used to diagnose health conditions that affect organs, tissue and bone. In most cases with back pain you will not require an MRI. Most back pain is rarely due to any serious disease or damage and clears up in a few weeks. If you have pain from your back, which is travelling to your leg (sciatica) that is not improving within 6 to 12 weeks of normal treatment and rehabilitation then an MRI may be considered. Discuss these symptoms with your physiotherapist or GP who can decide what is most appropriate for you.

Do I need an X-ray?

An X-ray is a painless way of producing pictures of inside the body using radiation. In most cases of back pain, X-rays are not necessary. Most back pain is rarely due to any serious disease or damage and clears up in a few weeks. An X-ray rarely helps diagnose the problem and can expose you to unnecessary radiation. Discuss this further with your physiotherapist or GP.

Do I need an operation?

Most back pain clears up in a few weeks by taking painkillers, keeping active and taking action. In the UK only around 1-2% of people with back pain ever require surgery. Your physiotherapist or GP can give you more information on this.

Common myths about back pain

'There is a trapped nerve'

Nerves are rarely trapped. If there is a nerve problem, it is more likely that it is the sciatic nerve, which is irritated but not trapped. An irritated nerve gets better if you reduce the irritation whereas a trapped nerve can be much more difficult to clear up. You can help reduce the irritation by taking painkillers and keeping active.

'I have sciatica'

Sciatic pain is pain from your back that travels down the back of your leg often all the way into your foot. Sciatica is not a disease but a symptom. Sciatica is pain arising in the sciatic nerve, most often from something irritating it. There are many different causes for this. Fortunately, like most back pain symptoms, focusing on trying to stay active and getting back to normal will enable the quickest recovery.

'I must be 100% pain free before I go back to work'

The longer you are off work then the less likely it is you will ever get back. Plan to get back to work as soon as you can even if on lighter duties at first. Review the information in the Work Section above. Discuss this with your employer, sooner rather than later.

'I should try and avoid activity with back pain'

Keeping active is the best thing to help you get back to normal. Avoiding activity will hinder your recovery rather than help it. You may need to start slowly or modify normal activities at first.

'Rest is the best thing for back pain'

Rest rarely helps back pain and may actually slow down your recovery. If you have sciatic pain you may need to treat it with care for a day or two. However, get up and get moving as soon as you can. You may need to start slowly or modify normal activities at first. Review the 'Staying Active with Back Pain guide' (page 13) for more detailed information.

‘Tablets for back pain should only be taken when it is really sore’

It is important that you take any tablets you have for your back pain as per the instructions on the packet. Take them regularly. Taking painkillers only when your back is painful is fire fighting the pain and tends to be less effective overall.

‘Back pain never clears up’

Most back pain settles quickly. Although it is important to be realistic... there is no one super cure for all back pain. The best way to enable recovery is to keep active, get back to normal and to return to work. If your back pain is not settling in a week or so contact your physiotherapist or GP.

‘Should I take painkillers?’

Painkillers can help you keep moving. However, it is important that if you are already taking medication for something else or have other health problems you **check with the pharmacist** at your local chemist before taking painkillers for your back problem. You can find your local pharmacist here www.nhs24.com/FindLocal

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- Always follow the instructions on the packet.
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- You can only take three 400mg ibuprofen a day. You should not take ibuprofen if you have stomach problems such as ulcers, or have had a previous allergic reaction to ibuprofen. Always take ibuprofen with or just after food. Don't take ibuprofen within 48 hours of an injury.
- If you have asthma, ibuprofen may make it worse, but if you have taken it before with no problems then you can safely take it again. If you are not sure, speak to your pharmacist.
- Take them regularly, not just when you are sore, for the next three to four days only.
- If you feel you still need pain relief after four days then speak to your pharmacist for advice.

More Information

Where can I get more information about back pain?

Accessing services and information

Five of the best places to look for safe, quality and effective information about back pain and where to find and access NHS Scotland treatment and rehabilitation services are:

1. Scottish Backs

This web site is supported by NHS inform, NHS 24 and NHS Scotland and has the best up to date information about back pain. There are links to work and employee issues, simple exercise advice and downloadable information.

www.scottishbacks.co.uk

2. NHS inform

NHS inform is a national development, delivered by NHS 24 to provide a co-ordinated single source of quality assured health information about health and health services in Scotland. NHS inform can be accessed either via the web at www.nhsinform.co.uk or via Helpline number at 0800 22 44 88 where the Health information advisers will provide advice and signposting to information.

3. VideoPhysio

Hear from people who have had back pain. VideoPhysio allows you to watch and listen to how you could cope with your back pain without it taking over your life.

www.YouTube.com/videophysio

4. NHS 24

NHS 24 provides comprehensive up-to-date health information and self-care advice for people in Scotland. You will find information on how to access NHS Scotland services here.

www.nhs24.com

5. Looking Local

Looking Local offers a national service helping you to access public services, search for local information and advice. You can text your postcode to 61061, and you will get an immediate text response with a link to your local services within Looking Local. (Normal charges for texting messages apply)

A Guide to Staying Active with Back Pain

Get on with your life

You know that keeping active is good for your health - it is just the same for your back. The most important thing is for you to get on with your life. Stay in control. You really can help yourself to enable a successful recovery.

Keep it moving and strike a balance

Some things may take a little longer or you may need to change how you do them. Of course, you may need to take it a little easier or move a bit more carefully at first. However, do not stop altogether.

You can still do most normal activities without putting too much strain on your back. Simple, painkillers such as paracetamol or anti inflammatories may help you get going. Whatever medication you are taking it is important that you keep your back moving. This may hurt a bit at first, but it does not do any damage - hurt is not the same as harm. It is worth carefully working through any initial discomfort - because you will get back to normal that much quicker.

- **Change position often. Do not sit or stand in one position for too long.**
- **Take breaks when driving or sitting. Get up and walk about to avoid stiffening up.**
- **Continue to do your normal activities.**
- **Being active will help you get better faster.**
- **Walking is a good form of regular exercise that will help you.**

What about work?

Staying active and getting on with your life means staying at work or returning to work as soon as possible. You do not have to wait until the pain is 100% gone. In fact, getting back to work can help you recover faster. Do not be afraid to ask colleagues for help if you need to. See the Back Pain at Work Guide (page 14). The longer you are off the less likely it is you will get back. Some tasks may be more difficult when your back is sore, but back pain is not usually caused by work. Work is good for physical and mental health. Discuss this with your employer, sooner rather than later.

More information www.scottishbacks.co.uk

Don't take back pain lying down

Back Pain at Work Sheet: Why is back pain an issue for your employees?

Your employees are your most important assets and you rely on a fit and healthy workforce. So it makes good business sense to make sure that you are able to manage one of the biggest causes of sickness absence. Most of us get backache at some time in our lives. Back pain can be very painful, but most often is not due to any serious disease or damage. Research shows that with back pain, it is best to **STAY ACTIVE** and to continue ordinary activities as normally as possible. This is the best way of enabling a successful recovery.

What about work?

Back pain does not need to be completely gone to get back to work. Sore backs may be limiting at first, but it is still possible to do most normal activities without putting too much strain on the back. People recover faster and everybody benefits by staying at work or returning to work as early as possible, even if this means starting with light duties.

Extra help and support at this time is a good investment.

Here are some simple inexpensive steps to support your employee to stay at work or return to work as soon as they can:

- **Think about how you might be able to modify their job or provide some extra support for a short time**
- **Talk to your employee about different ways they could do their job for a short while. Often they will have simple solutions.**
- **Can the employee return to work in a gradual way rather than back to normal hours immediately?**

For more information about back pain and work

1. Visit www.scottishbacks.co.uk

2. Healthy Working Lives

www.healthyworkinglives.com

Free occupational health and safety advice for employers in Scotland, covering a range of health and safety issues.

Free National Advice Line Health Working Lives: Telephone 0800 019 2211. If you want confidential advice and information on a wide range of workplace health issues, including Health Promotion, Occupational Health and Safety, Employability and Vocational Rehabilitation, or you want to contact them via email, or via the link below.

www.healthyworkinglives.com/contact/email/email-query.aspx

3. Working Health Service Scotland (WHSS)

www.healthyworkinglives.com/working-health-services-scotland/about.aspx

This service has been set up to improve health and support individuals to remain in work or return to work.

WHSS is available to people of working age and who are employed by a small to medium enterprise (i.e. companies which have less than 250 employees). Employee should be based in Scotland and have no access to Occupational Health/Employment Assistance Programmes.

For more information and support call free on 0800 019 2211.

4. Health and Safety Executive

www.hse.gov.uk

The HSE can offer support and advice for employees and employers.

Don't take back pain lying down

Glossary

Acute back pain

Acute back pain is generally recognised as pain that lasts for up to six weeks.

Chronic pain

Chronic pain is continuous, long-term pain of more than 12 weeks or after the time that healing would have been thought to have occurred in pain after trauma or surgery. www.painassociationscotland.com is a good place to start looking for more information on this subject.

Healthy Working Lives

Healthy Working Lives is available to assist employers and employees in a wide range of topics relating to the workplace to create a healthy and motivated workforce. To do this, they offer free and confidential Workplace Visits, practical information and advice, and a structured Award Programme (www.healthyworkinglives.com)

MRI scan

MRI stands for magnetic resonance imaging. It is the use of magnets and radio waves to take detailed pictures of inside the body.

Neuropathic pain

Neuropathic pain is defined by the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) as pain arising from inflammation or injury to the peripheral or central nervous system.

NHS inform

NHS inform is a national development, delivered by NHS 24 to provide a coordinated single source of quality assured health information about health and health services in Scotland. www.nhsinform.co.uk

Physiotherapy

Physiotherapy is a healthcare profession with a science foundation. The range of work is very broad and varied and involves working with people to promote their own health and well-being. Physiotherapy helps restore movement and function to as near normal as possible when someone is affected by injury, illness or by developmental or other disability.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation is the process of restoring function to a person who has had an illness or injury so as to regain maximum self-sufficiency and function in a normal, or as near normal manner as possible.

Sciatica

Sciatica is not a disease but a symptom. Sciatica is pain arising in the sciatic nerve, most often from something irritating it not trapping it. The sciatic nerve is the largest nerve in the body, running from the spinal cord down through the buttock and the back of each leg to supply all the muscles of the lower limb. It also carries sensory information back from the leg to the spinal cord and via the cord to the brain.

Scottish Backs

Scottish Backs is an online resource for people with low back pain. The information on this site will assist people with back pain to prevent it taking over aspects of their work and day-to-day life. It presents consistent advice, based on the best available evidence. It can be found at www.scottish-backs.co.uk.

Slipped disc

A slipped disc is the common name for the medical term 'prolapsed' or 'herniated' disc. Many people in the UK have back pain and although a slipped disc can cause back pain and/or leg pain, there are many other reasons for these symptoms.

The discs are protective, circular pads of cartilage, that lie between the bones of your spine (vertebrae) and cushion the vertebrae when you jump or run. They are made up of a tough, fibrous case, which contains a softer gel.

A slipped disc occurs when the outer part of a disc ruptures and allows the gel inside to bulge outwards from between the vertebrae. The damaged disc can put pressure on your whole spinal cord or on a single nerve fibre. This means that a slipped disc can cause pain both around the area of the bulge or anywhere along the area controlled by an affected nerve.

X-ray

An X-ray is a painless way of producing pictures of inside the body using radiation.

Disclaimer

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