

Lower Back Pain

This fact sheet helps you to know what is 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you suffer from back pain. It also tells you when you should become concerned and when to seek advice from a health professional, so that you can work together to find the best way forward.

Useful facts

What is lower back pain? Lower back pain describes tension, soreness and/or stiffness in the lower back, in most cases without a specific underlying cause.

How common is back pain? Lower back pain affects 8 out of 10 people in the UK at some time in their life.

Are my symptoms likely to be serious? No, lower back pain is rarely due to a serious underlying cause, even if you are in quite a lot of pain. See 'When to seek medical advice' over the page.

Do I need to rest? Backs are made for moving. Despite your pain, try and get back to normal activities as soon as you can – the sooner, the better.

What can I expect to happen?

How long are my symptoms likely to last? Your back is likely to get better by itself, but you may experience occasional twinges and aches for weeks and months. 60% of people recover within 6 weeks. 80-90% recover within 12 weeks.

Do I need any medical treatment or surgery? Back pain usually gets better without medical treatment or surgery, even when a 'slipped disc' is responsible.

Will I need further tests? You are unlikely to need X-rays or any other tests.

What can I do to get myself better - now and in the future?

Back exercises: Simple back exercises, improving your posture, yoga and the Alexander Technique can be helpful.

Keep moving: Avoid lying down and remain active as much as possible, even if you are uncomfortable. This will not harm your back, and you can expect to get better more quickly. Stay positive and keep doing things you enjoy.

Heat and cold: A hot bath or hot water bottle can ease pain from tense muscles, while cold from an ice pack or a bag of frozen peas (wrap in a wet cloth and apply to the painful area) can help relieve discomfort from sudden back pain.

Painkillers: 'Rub-on' (topical) treatments and anti-inflammatory pain relief such as ibuprofen are effective in most cases. Paracetamol on its own is not recommended for back pain but it may be used with another painkiller. Stronger medicines are an additional option when simpler ones are not working. Ask a member of your pharmacy team for advice and always read the information about allergies on the pack or the patient information leaflet included.

Sleeping position: Take the strain off your back by trying different sleeping positions and putting a pillow between your legs or under your knees if you prefer lying on your back.

Lift carefully: Lift close to your body, bend your knees instead of your back, and try to avoid lifting heavy items.

Work: Try to stay at work or return to work as soon as you can. If you take time off, talk to your employer about options such as a phased return to work, altered hours, amended duties or workplace adaptations. Your GP can help with issuing a sick note (now called 'fit note') if you need to stay off work for more than a week.

Other treatments: Physiotherapy, acupuncture or seeing a chiropractor or osteopath can also be helpful (make sure they're registered).

When should I seek medical help?

If your symptoms do not start to improve within 3 days, if your back pain recurs regularly for more than 6 weeks or if you are concerned, contact your surgery. Seek immediate medical advice if you notice any of the following warning signs, which may suggest that your back pain could possibly be caused by a more serious underlying condition:

Pain getting worse: You have severe pain that gets worse rather than better.

Feeling unwell: You feel really unwell from your back pain.

Fever: You have a fever (a temperature of over 38°C, or 100.4°F) as well.

Chest pain: You have back pain that travels up into higher areas of your chest.

Injury: Your pain started after a major injury (such as a fall or an accident).

Age: You have new back pain and you are younger than 20 or older than 50 years.

Sleep problems: You have night-time pain that affects your sleep.

Walking: You have become unsteady on your feet since your back pain started.

Weight loss: You have also been losing weight for no obvious reason.

The following suggest an emergency:

Unusual sensations: You feel numb or notice 'pins and needles' in the area around your bottom (the 'saddle area'), your genitals, or both of your legs.

Urine problems: You cannot keep your urine in.

Bowel problems: You lose your bowel control.

Where can I find out more?

A member of your pharmacy team can help with pain relief and for more information try these websites:

NHS England website: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/back-pain/>

NHS Inform, Scotland website: <https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints/self-management-advice/back-problems>

NI Direct, Northern Ireland website: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/conditions/back-pain>

NHS 111, Wales Website: <https://111.wales.nhs.uk/Backpain/>

Pain Toolkit: www.paintoolkit.org