

## Coping with back pain

### Other formats

If you need this information in another format such as audio CD, Braille, large print, high contrast, British Sign Language or translated into another language, please contact the PALS desk on 01271 314090 or at [ndht.pals@nhs.net](mailto:ndht.pals@nhs.net).

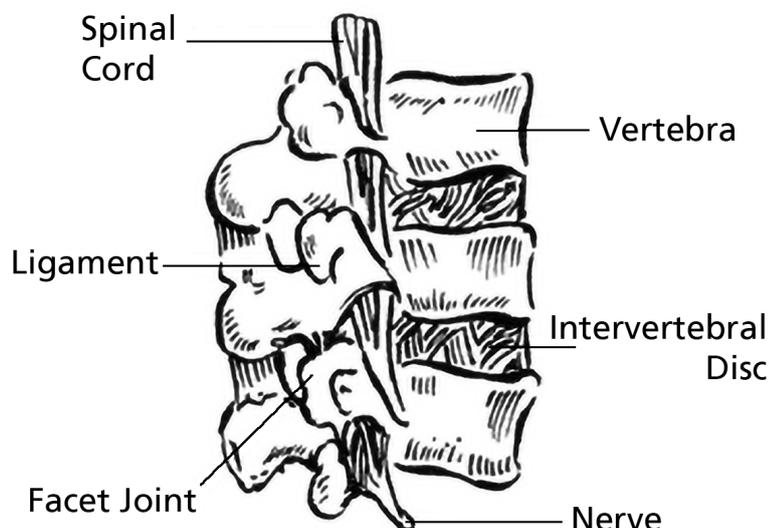
### Back facts

- Most back pain, even when it feels terrible, is not due to a serious disease. Sometimes aches and pains can last a long time but this doesn't mean it is serious. It can be frustrating, but it does usually settle within days or a few weeks, at least enough to let you get on with your life.
- A proportion of people who get backache will get it again within a couple of years. But that still does not mean that it is serious. Most people return to normal activity between episodes.
- Your back is designed for movement: it needs movement – a lot of movement. The sooner you get moving and doing your normal activities, the sooner you will feel better.
- Resting for more than a day or two usually doesn't help and may prolong pain and disability.
- The people who cope best with back pain are those who stay active and get on with life despite the pain.

### Causes of back pain

Your spine is one of the strongest parts of your body. It is made up of a column of solid stony blocks held together by discs and strong ligaments to give it flexibility and strength. It is surrounded by large and powerful muscles.

Most simple back strains do not cause lasting damage. The problem is usually that these structures are simply not working well and moving properly.



# 10 FACTS ABOUT BACK PAIN

by LaFisioterapia.net

info provided by Mary O'Keeffe et al.

## 1 BACK PAIN IS COMMON

Back pain can be very painful and worrying, but is very common and rarely dangerous. 84% of people worldwide will experience back pain at some point, being equally common across all age groups

## 2 SCANS FOR BACK PAIN ARE RARELY NEEDED AND CAN BE HARMFUL

Scans are only needed when a serious condition is suspected (cancer, fracture, infection), only 1% of all back pain worldwide. Scans will almost always show something and it is poorly linked with back pain. Many of these findings are common in people without pain

## 3 THE BACK IS NOT THAT VULNERABLE TO DAMAGE

Most people think the spine needs to be protected. Scientific research has shown that back structures do not go 'out of place' or 'slip'. This is incorrect and has led to fear, protective guarding, avoidance and disability

## 4 THE BACK IS DESIGNED FOR BENDING AND LIFTING

In the same way that a person can get a sore knee after doing an unaccustomed activity, people can get back pain when they lift something awkwardly or something that they aren't used to. The key thing is practice and letting your body get used to different loads and weights

## 5 YOU CAN HAVE BACK PAIN WITHOUT BACK DAMAGE OR INJURY

Pain can be turned up by many factors: physical, psychological, health, lifestyle and social factors. This means that you may feel more pain when you move or try to do something, even though you are not damaging your back



6

## **DON'T TAKE BACK PAIN LYING DOWN AND DON'T RUSH FOR SURGERY**

There is very strong evidence that keeping active and returning to all usual activities gradually is important in aiding recovery. Surgery is rarely an option for back pain. A non-surgical option, which includes activity/exercise, should always come first

7

## **EXERCISE IS GOOD FOR BACK PAIN BUT PEOPLE ARE OFTEN AFRAID**

Exercise is helpful for back pain, and the best is the type you enjoy. More than 30 minutes per day has the greatest health benefits, but any amount you can manage will result in benefit

8

## **STRONG MEDS DO NOT HAVE STRONG BENEFITS FOR BACK PAIN**

Scientific research has shown that strong painkillers do not provide greater pain relief over simpler options, and actually have greater potential for harm

9

## **BUYER BEWARE: INTERNET, FADS, FASHIONS AND BANDWAGONS**

A lot of things have not yet been tested so you are potentially just wasting your money, and when they have been tested the results are very unimpressive

10

## **BACK PAIN CAN GET BETTER**

Of course, you can injure your back, but be confident that it will get better

*Twitter: @MaryOKeeffe007 @fisioterapianet*



## How to manage your back pain

- Bed rest for more than a day or two actually prolongs the pain. If you have to rest, don't lie half slumped. Try to keep your back straight. Lie on your front (with a pillow under your tummy), on your back (with a pillow under your knees) or on your side (with a pillow between your knees), whichever is most comfortable.
- Limit your activities for a time, if needed, but stay active and get on with your life.
- Try not to slouch and avoid sitting for more than 20-30 minutes without getting up and moving around/stretching.
- Do not hesitate to use painkillers if you need them. You can safely ease the pain and get active: your body will not let you do any damage. Surprisingly, over the counter painkillers, are often the most effective for back pain.
- Pain killers should be taken regularly every 4-6 hours at the recommended dose. You may need to take them for a week or two. You can also take anti-inflammatory tablets like Ibuprofen, except if you are pregnant, have kidney or liver disease, asthma, indigestion or an ulcer. If in doubt, talk to your pharmacist or GP.
- Heat and cold can give short term relief and allow you to move better. For example, a well-padded hot water bottle, a hot shower or frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel placed on the sore area for 5-10 minutes.
- Manipulation/ joint mobilisation may help if done by a qualified professional – a registered physiotherapist, osteopath or chiropractor. However, you should be shown ways to keep your joints moving and your muscles strong.
- Gentle movements can help ease the pain. Build these up steadily in the first few days, before you stiffen up, then progress to more organised exercise.

**Remember – anxiety, stress and muscle tension can increase your pain, so try to relax.**

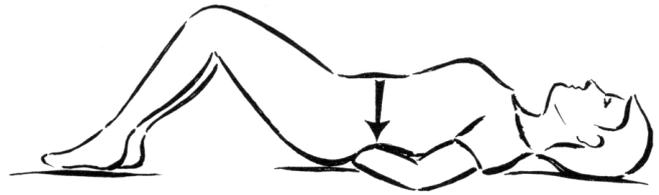
## Some back exercises

Exercise gets your back moving again and strengthen your muscles which help support your back. They help to stretch tight muscles, nerves and joints and stop the working parts seizing up. Getting stiff joints and muscles working can be uncomfortable but that does not mean you are doing any damage. Athletes accept that when they start training, their muscles can hurt.

Try these exercises slowly, a few at a time, often during the day. You may feel increased discomfort during exercise (it should not be severe or long lasting), but once you stop, this should reduce and become easier. If the pain gets progressively worse, ask your physiotherapist whether to continue the exercise, or modify it.

## 1. Pelvic tilt

Lying on your back with your knees bent, place your hand in the small of your back. Press your back onto your hand, hold for a few seconds, release.



## 2. Knee rolling

Keeping your shoulder on the floor slowly roll both knees over to one side, starting gently, repeat to the other side.



## 3. Alternate leg hugs

Lying on your back with your knees bent, bend one up and hold it with your hands. Gently draw it up towards your chest, hold for a couple of seconds then gently lower. Repeat this with the other knee, gently taking it toward your chest.



Now try drawing your knee(s) up and across to your opposite shoulder.

## 4. Back extensions

Lying on your front, place your hands palm down level with your ears. Push up on your arms to straighten your elbows and arch your back as far as you can manage. (Don't try to get all the way up straight away. If it is very uncomfortable, you can start off by just propping on your elbows.) Keep your hips down. Relax and let your back sag.



Hold this position for a few seconds then gently lower.

## 5. Back bends

Stand with your hands at the base of your back. Let your hips relax forward and lean back slowly over your hands. Don't forget to keep your knees straight.

Remember on/off discomfort is expected but this should not get worse.



## 6. Using your tummy muscles

Do not hold your breath. Gently tighten and hold your lower tummy muscles. Can you maintain this while you are walking or as you go from sitting to standing?

## What to do if problems occur

If you have severe pain which gets worse over several weeks instead of better, or if you are unwell or losing weight, you should see your doctor.

Here are a few symptoms, which are all very rare. However if you **suddenly develop** any of these, you should see a doctor straight away or attend your local Emergency Department.

- Difficulty passing or controlling urine.
- Numbness around your back passage or genitals.
- Numbness, pins and needles, or weakness in both legs.
- Unsteadiness on your feet.

**Remember however, that back pain is common and very rarely due to serious disease.**

## Further information

British Association of Spinal Surgeons

website: <https://spinesurgeons.ac.uk/Patient-Information>

If you have any queries or concerns about your back, please contact your local Physiotherapy Department.

(Illustrations - © PhysioTools Ltd)

### PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email [ndht.pals@nhs.net](mailto:ndht.pals@nhs.net). You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

## Have your say

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at [www.careopinion.org.uk](http://www.careopinion.org.uk).

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust  
Raleigh Park, Barnstaple  
Devon EX31 4JB  
Tel. 01271 322577  
[www.northdevonhealth.nhs.uk](http://www.northdevonhealth.nhs.uk)

© Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust  
This leaflet was designed by the Communications Department.  
Tel: 01271 313970 / email: [ndht.contactus@nhs.net](mailto:ndht.contactus@nhs.net)