

# Acute Back Pain

## Service User Information Leaflet

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Produced by Fife Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy Service

Diagrams: ©PhysioTools

## Introduction

Back pain is very common and can affect approximately 80% of the population at some point in their lives. The information in this leaflet is based on the latest studies and there is a lot you can do to help yourself.

### Remember:

- Back pain or back ache is not usually due to any serious damage;
- Most back pain settles quickly;
- It can be very painful. You may need to reduce some of your activities for a couple of days. Resting longer than this does not help and may delay your recovery.
- Your back is built to move, it is important to keep moving. The sooner you get back to normal, the sooner your back will start to feel better;
- People who are fitter generally get less back pain and recover more quickly. Think about what you can do to improve your own fitness when this episode settles.

### In the acute stages:

- Bed rest can delay your recovery. It is better to stay active.
- If you have to go to bed, try to start moving again after 2 days. Gradually increase your activity day by day. This can cause you some discomfort for a short time. This is normal.
- Take any medicines given by your doctor regularly. Don't wait until the pain becomes out of control before you take them.
- Use heat such as a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel or a cold bag of frozen peas wrapped in a wet towel to give short term relief. This can be used in addition to your medication.
- Do **not** stay in one position for longer than 20 to 30 minutes. It is important to keep moving around. Prolonged sitting, especially in a low soft armchair can make the pain worse.

## Cauda Equina Syndrome Warning Signs

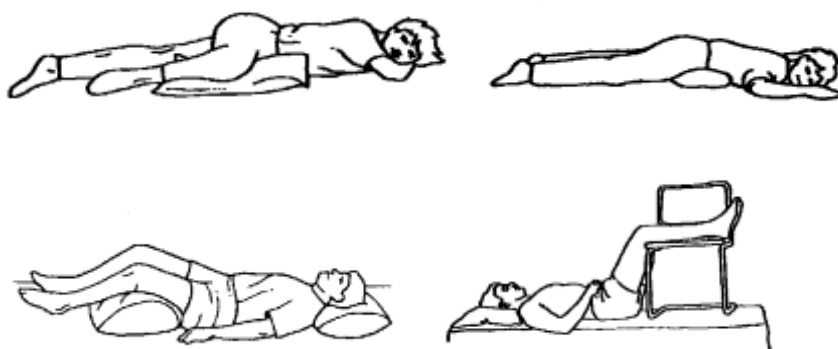
Many patients have a combination of back pain, leg pain, leg numbness and weakness. These symptoms can be distressing, but do not necessarily require emergency medical attention.

**A rare, but serious back condition, Cauda Equina Syndrome, can lead to permanent damage or disability and will need to be seen by an Emergency Specialist Spinal Team. Some warning signs of Cauda Equina Syndrome are as follows:**

- Loss of feeling/pins and needles between your inner thighs or genitals
- Numbness in or around your back passage or buttocks
- Altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- Increasing difficulty when you try to urinate
- Increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of urine
- Loss of sensation when you pass urine
- Leaking urine or recent need to use pads
- Not knowing when your bladder is either full or empty
- Inability to stop a bowel movement or leaking
- Loss of sensation when you pass a bowel motion
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Loss of sensation in genitals during sexual intercourse

**Any one or combination of these seek medical help immediately**

Here are a few positions that people find comfortable when their back is really sore.



**How to stay active:**

- The idea is not to stay in one position longer than 20 to 30 minutes without a break. Try and move a little further and faster each day.
- Change from sitting to lying to walking regularly. Try to do this every hour when awake. This will stop you from stiffening up in any one position.
- Sitting is a common position that increases back pain. Use a rolled up towel or a lumbar roll to help support your back whilst sitting up straight.
- If sitting is uncomfortable a hard straight backed chair is better than a soft armchair.
- If you sit at work make sure you are not sitting slumped.
- Stand up and stretch backwards regularly. Take a break from your desk as often as possible.
- If not improving after 2 to 3 weeks you should seek the advice of your GP or physiotherapist.



### **Should I Have an X-ray?**

An x-ray of your back may not help identify the cause of pain, unless you have had a fall or direct injury. There are two main reasons for this. Most back pain comes from the soft tissues of the back, such as ligaments and muscles. These tissues cannot be seen on an x-ray. As we get older we all have changes in the bones / joints of the spine, which are due to normal ageing. These age related changes will be seen on an x-ray, but may not be causing the pain.

### **Useful Information**

NHS Inform: [www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints](http://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints)

For free and confidential advice about work call the Healthy Working Lives Advice line on **0800 019 2211**. [www.healthyworkinglives.com](http://www.healthyworkinglives.com)