

# Chronic Back Pain Back on Track

## Service User Information Leaflet

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## **How to Manage Your Chronic Low Back Pain**

The information in this leaflet comes from:

- What patients have said they want to know about persistent low back pain
- The most up to date evidence on how to move forward.

You have been given this leaflet because you have persistent low back pain.

You are the one who is most affected by your pain.



What **you** do is more important than diagnosis or treatment.

### **Back Pain is Very Common**

- Up to 65% of people have back pain in 1 year
- Up to 85% of people have back pain at some point in their life
- 1 year after the first episode 50% of people have ongoing pain and disability

Most people get back pain at some point in their lives. This does not mean it is serious. What you do about it can help you cope with your condition.

### **X-ray and scans?**

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.

Sometimes scans will show age normal age related changes these may not be causing the pain. People may be told that they have 'wear and tear' or 'bulging discs'. This can sound worrying. In fact these 'abnormal' findings are actually 'normal' as we

get older. By about 40 years of age 60% of people will have disc bulges. This means that many people have disc bulges, but do not have pain.

Investigations don't always explain pain and this can be frustrating. Worrying about the cause of pain can be a barrier to moving forward. Most people who have back pain can learn to manage the symptoms themselves.

### **What About Surgery?**

- Surgery does not help most people with low back pain
- Not all surgery is successful
- There are significant risk to anaesthetics and surgery
- The outcome for some surgeries can be the same as those that have not had surgery after two years

What other patients have said:

'I had been pinning my hopes on surgery and when I was told it wasn't an option I was disappointed. At the same time I had heard of people where surgery hadn't helped at all.

I knew that surgery was a drastic solution especially if there was no guarantee that it would help.'

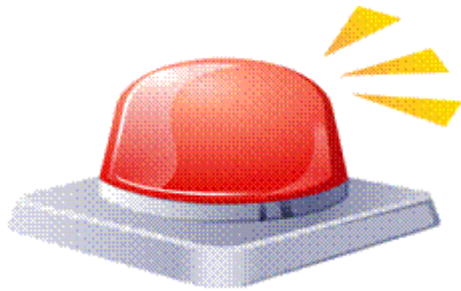
In many cases, exercise and having a positive attitude are the best advice for managing persistent low back pain.

### **Surely Severe Pain Means Severe Injury?**

In acute pain, pain is a signal of actual or possible damage. For example if you stub your toe you may have a high pain level at the start but it quickly settles. The pain is drawing your attention to your toe. Once you realise what it is you don't worry about it and the pain eases.

Chronic pain is pain that lasts longer than 3 months. Most soft tissue injuries heal within 3 months. In some cases the injury heals, but the pain continues. We cannot

say why this happens in some people but not in others. The latest research shows that changes in the body's pain or 'alarm' system are important factors.



Serious damage is rare in back pain. Being positive and moving on are the best ways to improve in the long term.

**False:** Pain always means harm

**True:** Pain is part of the body's alarm system to alert you to an actual or potential problem. Sometimes the alarm system gets rewired and sends constant signals even when there is nothing serious wrong.

### **Exercise or Bed Rest?**

All the best research shows that staying active is one of the best things you can do for back pain. If you need to rest, no more than 1 or 2 days is advised.

Disadvantages of resting too much or avoiding activity are::

- Muscles weaken
- You get stiffer
- You lose your fitness
- You are able to do things less
- Poor sleep
- You put on weight
- Feel fed up
- Feel frustrated
- Lose confidence
- Feel lethargic
- Lose concentration
- Become forgetful

Benefits of being active are:

- Strengthens muscles
- Strengthens heart and lungs
- Reduce blood pressure
- Lose weight
- Reduced stress
- Strengthens your immune system
- Makes your bones stronger
- Improves concentration
- Reduce pain
- Lifts mood

## What are the best exercises?

- The ones that you do!



- Build up gradually by pacing rather than jumping ahead. This means staying in control by pausing before the pain worsens and not fighting through the pain.
- Doing a small amount each day is better than a large amount once or twice per week
- People who stay active have a positive attitude and suffer less

What other patients have said:

'...the more I rested the worse the pain got. I couldn't sit down for any length of time, I had to move about a lot'

'When I was lying down I got relief from the pain but it seemed to come back with a vengeance, I found that lying down made it worse'

'I noticed that when I moved around the house, I got a bit of relief, so I thought maybe exercise will work'

**False:** Exercise can cause more harm

**True:** Most people find some discomfort at the start. It is important to start gradually to strengthen and build stamina

**False:** Surely it is no pain no gain?

**True:** No. Pushing through the pain barrier only causes more pain.

### **Worrying About Pain Can Make it Worse**

It is common for people to be anxious or worried about back pain. Current evidence shows that this can contribute to pain. Other factors which can make you worse are shown below:

- Thinking that you have a serious injury
- Believing that hurt equals harm
- Avoiding movement or activity due to fear of causing damage
- Prolonged rest or inactivity
- Waiting for someone else to 'fix' your pain rather than getting on with life
- Becoming withdrawn and depressed.

The above factors can start early and become deep rooted. Pain is a physical and emotional experience. The earlier you get information that helps you to understand your situation the better.

- What other patients have said:

'It's when you get in the downward spiral, a wee bit of depression, thinking it is just going to get worse, it's never going to get better, that makes you worse'

'A bit of positive thinking helps you and it puts you in a better frame of mind.....your positive thinking keeps you going'.

**Question:** Does this mean the pain is all in my head?

**Answer:** No. Pain affects every aspect of life, work, family, relationships and social life. The earlier you get access to good information and by thinking positively you can reduce the impact of pain on your life.

## **Medication**

Painkillers may not cure the pain but can allow you to cope better. People who have had pain for a long time emphasise how important it is to discuss their medication with their GP. One of the most common beliefs is that you only take your tablets when you need them. This leads to poorly controlled pain or a 'yo-yo' effect. Tablets are more effective if taken regularly as prescribed. This means even when the pain is not as bad.

**False:** Painkillers 'mask the damage'

**True:** Painkillers taken properly allow you to get on with your day to day life and cope better.

## **Pain and Work**

Many people with chronic pain find it difficult to continue at work or do not see themselves returning to work. Sometimes the loss of social contact and structure to the day is as damaging as the financial loss. Despite the obstacles many people with chronic pain return to work.



If you are at work:

- Discuss your difficulties with your employer
- Stress that you want to be at work. Offer suggestions to overcome your problems.

If you have just been signed off work:

- Try to return as soon as possible. The longer you are off the less likely it is you will return.
- Discuss a graded return with temporary changes to your duties

If you are on benefits:

- Your 'Personal Adviser' at Job Centre Plus can help you discuss and provide assistance on return to work issues
- On some benefits you may get some support for retraining or you can work a certain amount of hours without it affecting your benefits.
- Others have found voluntary work helpful as it can help them feel 'part of society' again.

For free and confidential advice about work call the Health Working Lives Advice Line on 0800 019 2211.

### **Warning Signs**

**Less than 1% of low back pain is due to a serious problem.**

**Caude Equina syndrome is a rare, but serious back condition that we warn all back pain patients to monitor for. Cauda Equina Syndrome, can lead to permanent damage or disability and it is important to recognise it quickly and take action quickly. If you develop any new symptoms you will need to attend Accident and Emergency immediately.**

**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**

### **Summary**

Back pain is rarely due to anything serious.

The above information is from the most up to date research and guidelines.

The important thing is how you get on with your life.

How much your back pain affects you depends on what you do about it yourself.

### **Useful Information:**

NHS 24

[www.nhs24.com](http://www.nhs24.com)

Backcare

[www.backcare.org.uk](http://www.backcare.org.uk)

British Pain Society

[www.britishpainsociety.org](http://www.britishpainsociety.org)

Healthtalkonline – patients discuss their experiences



[www.healthtalkonline.org](http://www.healthtalkonline.org)

Living Life to the Full – online CBT course

[www.livinglifetothefull.org.uk](http://www.livinglifetothefull.org.uk)

Pain Association Scotland

[www.painassociation.com](http://www.painassociation.com)

Pain Concern

[www.painconcern.org.uk](http://www.painconcern.org.uk)

Scottish Backs

<http://www.nhsinform.co.uk/Health-Zones/Scottish-Backs/Stay-active-guide.aspx>

Mental Health Advice

<http://www.moodcafe.co.uk/Mental Health Advice>

Back Pain Overview

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOjTegn9RuY>

Understanding Pain Overview

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4b8oB757DKc>