

Back Pain

Anyone can get back pain at any age. It is a very common complaint affecting an estimated 60-80% of us at some point in our lives. It commonly occurs between the ages of 35-55 or over and is one of the main reasons for sickness absence from work.



Your back contains many different structures – bones, joints, muscles, ligaments and tendons. The spine is made up of 24 vertebrae with discs in-between. The discs allow your spine to bend and act as shock absorbers. The spinal cord travels down a central canal carrying nerves from your brain to the rest of your body.

It is often hard to exactly know what causes back pain but it is usually thought to be related to a strain in one of the above structures in your back rather than a nerve problem. Back pain caused by a more serious condition is rare.

Symptoms of back pain

ACUTE back pain – lasts less than 6 weeks

SUB-ACUTE back pain – lasts 6 weeks to 3 months

CHRONIC back pain – lasting longer than 3 months

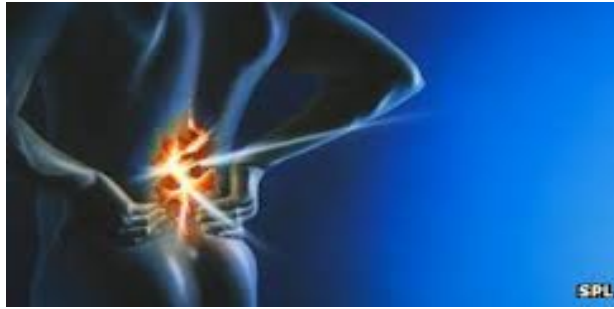
Often “non-specific” back pain felt as a soreness or stiffness in your lower back improves on its own within a few days. The majority of episodes of low back pain will resolve within 4-6 weeks.

It is important that you visit your GP as soon as possible if any of the following “red-flag” symptoms are present with your low back pain:

- A high temperature (fever)
- Redness or swelling on your back
- Pain down your legs and below your knees
- Numbness or weakness in one or both legs or around your buttocks

- Incontinence (loss of bladder or bowel control)
- Constant pain, particularly at night
- Pain that is worsening and spreading up your spine

These symptoms MAY indicate a more serious reason for your back pain so require professional medical advice.



Causes of back pain

Often there may be no identifiable cause for your back pain –such as a lifting injury or fall. However there may be a number of factors which can increase the risk of developing back pain or make it worse once you have it. Including:

- Poor posture e.g. sat at a computer for long periods
- Carrying excess weight
- Feeling stressed or anxious
- A trauma – such as a trip or fall
- Lifting, carrying, pushing or pulling loads incorrectly or that are too heavy
- Standing, sitting or bending down for long periods.

Other more serious causes of back pain are rare but can include:

- A fracture (break) in one of the bones in the spine
- Osteoporosis “brittle bones”
- A disc bulge “slipped disc” which puts pressure on the spinal nerves
- Spinal stenosis – a narrowing of the spaces in the spine
- Spondylolisthesis – one of the vertebrae slips forward and out of position
- Degenerative disc disease – wearing down of the discs
- Osteoarthritis – “wear and tear” affecting the joints of the spine
- Rheumatoid arthritis – an inflammatory condition

Low back pain can also be caused by an infection or cancer but it is very RARE.

Diagnosing back pain

When you visit your physiotherapist or GP they will probably be able to diagnose your back pain from your symptoms. Further tests, such as an MRI scan or x-rays, may only be required if your symptoms don't improve or you have "red flag" symptoms.

Treatment of back pain

See hand out titled "what to do when back pain strikes"

If your symptoms are more severe or do not settle down you may be referred to a specialist. This is to assess whether you may be suitable for spinal injections or surgery. These are not suitable for everyone and are usually required with most forms of back pain. Spinal surgery is only considered as a last resort if the pain is related to a specific cause.

Prevention of low back pain is better than cure!

- ❖ Regular exercise – particularly walking and swimming
- ❖ Try and keep stress levels to a minimum
- ❖ Bend from the knees and hips, not your back
- ❖ Practice good posture
- ❖ Speak to your GP or physiotherapist for advice
- ❖ Remember back pain is rarely due to something serious



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