

# The best way to deal with back pain

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Back pain is common and can be very painful but, serious or permanent damage is rare.

### The Facts

- Most back pain is not due to any serious disease
- The acute pain usually improves within days or a few weeks, at least enough to get on with your life. The long term outlook is good
- Sometimes aches and pains can last for quite a long time. But that doesn't mean its serious. It does usually settle eventually-even though its frustrating that no one can predict exactly when! Most people can get going quite quickly, even while they still have some pain.
- About half the people who get back pain will get it again within a couple of years and that still does not mean that it is serious. Between episodes most people return to normal activities with little if any pain. What you do in the early stages is very important. Rest for more than one or two days usually does not help and may actually prolong pain and disability.
- Your back is designed for movement. It needs a lot of movement. The sooner you get moving and doing your ordinary activities as normally as possible, the sooner you will feel better.
- The people who cope the best with back pain are those who stay active and get on with life despite the pain.
- **Back pain shouldn't cripple you so don't let it!**

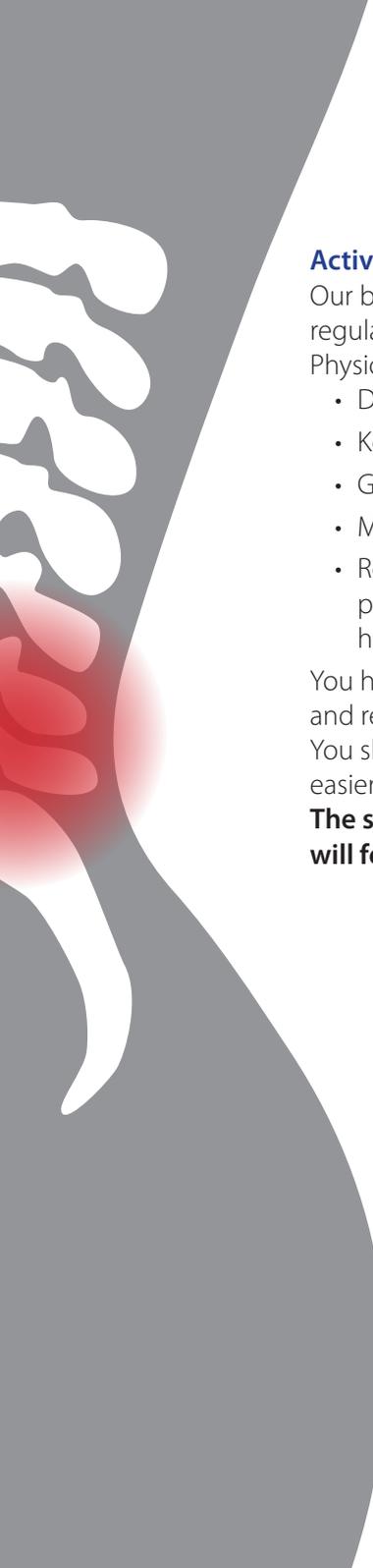
**The spine is one of the strongest parts of the body and gives us a great deal of flexibility and strength.** It is made of solid bony blocks joined by discs to give it strength and flexibility. It is reinforced by strong ligaments, and surrounded by large and powerful muscles that protect it.

- It is surprisingly difficult to damage your spine.
- Regardless of what you might have heard only a few people with back pain have a slipped disc or a trapped nerve.
- Even then, it usually gets better on its own and very few people ever need surgery.
- X-rays and MRI scans don't usually help in ordinary back pain and may even be misleading. Doctor's sometimes mention 'degeneration' which sounds frightening, but it's not damage. These are the normal changes with age – just like getting grey hair.

### Bed Rest Is Bad For Backs

We now know that bed rest for more than a day or two is the worst possible treatment, because in the long term it actually prolongs the pain;

- You get stiff
- Your muscles get weak
- Your bones get weaker
- You lose physical fitness
- You get depressed
- The pain feels worse
- It is harder and harder to get going



### Activity Is Good

Our bodies are built for movement and you need regular physical activity to remain fit and healthy.

Physical activity;

- Develops your muscles
- Keeps you supple
- Gives you stronger bones
- Makes you fitter and feel better
- Releases endorphins (your body's natural painkillers) which improve pain and make you feel happier.

You have two choices: rest and get worse, or get active and recover.

You should not fall into the trap of thinking it will be easier in a week or two, next month, next year. It won't!

**The sooner you get active, the sooner your back will feel better!**

## What can I do to help myself?

### Painkillers

You can take painkillers and mask the pain to get active because your body will not let you do any harm. There are painkillers you can buy over the counter, please speak to your pharmacist for advice on the most suitable one for you.

### Exercise

Exercise is the most important way that you can help yourself if you have back pain. If you stop being active for a long time, the muscles in your back become weak and you become less fit, and this can make your back pain worse. Research shows that regular exercise leads to shorter and less frequent episodes of back pain.

It's better to choose a form of exercise that you enjoy as you are more likely to stick to it. Any regular exercise that helps to make you flexible and stronger and increases your stamina is good, e.g.

- Walking
- Swimming
- Yoga/Pilates/Keep fit
- Most daily activities and hobbies in fact

Exercise might make your back feel a bit sore at first but it doesn't cause any harm-so don't let it put you off!

Start off slowly and gradually increase the amount of exercise you do. Try taking some painkillers beforehand too. Over time, your back will get stronger and more flexible and this should reduce the pain.

### Heat & Cold

Heat and ice packs can be used for short term relief of pain and to relax muscle tension. In the first 48 hours you can try a cold pack on the affected area for 5-10 minutes – this can be a bag of frozen peas rapped in a damp tea towel. Others may prefer heat – a hot water bottle, a bath or a shower.

## Posture

Try to maintain good posture when sitting at home, at work or in the car (see diagrams below). Staying in awkward positions while working or driving, for example will affect the soft tissues in your back and will increase your pain or your recovery time.

### Sitting

Choose a chair that is comfortable for you.

Lean against the back of the chair. You can try some support in the small of your back.

Distribute your body weight evenly on both hips.

Your knees should be at a right angle. Keep your knees even with or slightly higher than your hips (use a footrest or stool if necessary) Keep your feet flat on the floor.

Remember to get up and stretch regularly.



### Desk Work

Adjust your chair or table, and position of the computer screen, so that you don't have to slump. Have your work in front of you, not to the side.



### Driving

Use cushions to experiment if you need a higher seat or support in the small of your back. Stopping regularly to stretch and have a walk will help.



### Lifting correctly

Always think before you lift! **Do not** lift more than you need to. Keep the load close to your body. **Do not** twist while you are lifting but turn with your feet.

### You should avoid bending forwards or stooping.

Work surfaces at proper heights help prevent this.



### Sleeping

Some people find that a firmer mattress helps – or you can try chipboard under the mattress-Experiment. Try taking your painkillers an hour before you go to bed.

### How To Stay Active

#### Walking

You can walk for as long as you feel comfortable. There are no restrictions to walking! If you take a short walk every day, you can gradually increase the distance.

#### Exercises

These exercises are designed to stretch, strengthen and stabilise the structures that support your back. As with any physical activity it's normal to feel some aches in your muscles, especially if you've just started doing more exercise, but you should stop if you get any joint pain that doesn't go away quickly.

# Exercise

### Exercise 1: Knee rolling

Lie on your back, hands by your side. Bend your knees and, keeping your feet on the floor, roll your knees to one side, slowly. Stay on one side for 10 seconds. Repeat three times each side.



### Exercise 2: Bridging

Lie on your back with knees bent and feet on the floor.

1. Gently draw your lower tummy muscles.
2. Lift your pelvis and lower back (gradually vertebra by vertebra) off the floor. Hold the position for five seconds.
3. Lower down slowly returning to starting position. Repeat 5 times.



### Exercise 3: Knee to chest.

Lie on your back with knees bent and your feet on the floor. Bring one knee up and pull it gently into your chest for five seconds. Repeat for up to five times on each side.



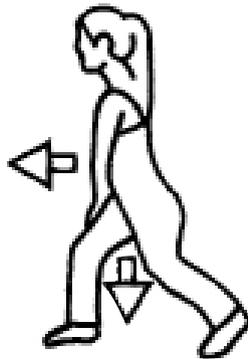
### Exercise 4: One leg stand – Front (stretches front thigh)

Steady yourself with one hand on a chair. Bend one leg up behind you. Hold your foot for 10 seconds and repeat three times each side.



### Exercise 5: Deep Lunge (Stretches muscles in front of thigh and abdomen)

Stand with feet at shoulder width. Take a lunging step forward. Place your hands on the leading leg for support. Drop into the lunge so that the trailing knee bends down towards the floor. Keep your chest lifted, back straight and head looking forwards. Hold for five seconds and repeat three times on each side.



### Patient Experience Team

If you have any concerns or need advice about accessing NHS services, you can speak in confidence to the Patient Experience Team on 0800 085 7935.

or you can email [pals@sept.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@sept.nhs.uk)

This leaflet can be produced in large print, audio cassette, Braille and other languages on request.



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The email address is [mskphysio.sept@nhs.net](mailto:mskphysio.sept@nhs.net)  
Central Number is: 01279 827404

This leaflet is proposed as a guide for patients in the early management of lower back pain. The information it contains is based on the latest research and guidelines. Doctors and Physiotherapists may give it to their patients to help with the management in the early stage.

Written by;  
Gulten Dogan, Spinal Extended Scope Physiotherapist, SEPT  
Images by; Richard Sharp, Integrated Services Manager MSK Manager, SEPT