
Back Pain Recovery

Important Facts I

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The spine is one of the strongest parts of the body and in most cases simple strains cause no lasting damage.

While X-rays and MRI scans can detect serious spinal injuries, they do not help where the damage is less serious. If your doctor or therapist cannot exactly locate the source of the pain this can be a good sign - indicating there is no serious damage to the spine.

The most acute pain will generally improve within a few days or weeks but you may find aches and niggling pain last longer. This prolonged pain does not indicate that there is a serious problem.

The important thing is to get moving as soon as possible. Most people can start getting on with their lives once the most acute pain has subsided, resuming normal activities with little or no pain.

It helps to get back to work as soon as possible, even if you have some pain. **Your back will usually not get any worse at work than it will at home.** If you have a heavy, manual job, then you may need some help or modification to your workload initially, but generally all that is needed is some simple changes. **The longer you stay off work the more likely you are to develop long-term pain and disability.**

Going back to work and your other activities will take your mind off your back problem. This will assist your recovery by reducing stress and anxiety, which in turn cause muscle tension.

Your back is designed for movement: the sooner you get moving and return to normal activities the better you will feel.

Bed rest for more than a day or two is bad for your back and can actually prolong the pain.

Warning signs

If you have severe pain that does not improve, or even gets worse over several weeks, or if you are unwell with back pain, then you should consult your doctor.

Other symptoms which indicate the possibility of a more serious problem include:

- ◆ Difficulty passing or controlling urine
- ◆ Numbness around the back passage or genitals
- ◆ Numbness, pins & needles or weakness in both legs ◆

Unsteadiness on your feet

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Important Facts 2



- ◆ **Most back injuries are not serious.** There is usually no damage to the bones, discs or nerves in the spine.
- ◆ Pain that develops a day or two after the accident is good. It means no serious harm has been done.
- ◆ Acute symptoms usually settle within a few days to a few weeks so that you can get on with your life.
- ◆ What you do in the early stages is very important. Rest for more than a day or two DOES NOT help and may prolong your pain and disability.
- ◆ **The people who recover fastest from back pain are those who stay active, exercise and get on with their lives, despite pain and stiffness.**
- ◆ Permanent damage from a back injury is rare and the long term outlook is good.
- ◆ Occasionally pain from a back injury can persist or recur for quite a long time. This still does not mean that it is serious. It can be very frustrating but the best thing to do is to get on with your life, despite the symptoms. This will help the symptoms to subside.
- ◆ **Your back is designed for movement. The sooner you get moving and get on with your normal daily activities the sooner you will feel better.**

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Best Management



The new approach to back injury and pain is to get active as soon as possible. The sooner you can get moving the quicker your recovery will be. Getting back to work and your normal activities will also distract you from your pain.

Even when your back is still painful there are activities you can participate in without putting too much stress on your back:

- ◆ Walking
- ◆ Swimming
- ◆ Exercise bike
- ◆ Dancing, yoga or keep fit



Exercise keeps your back moving so you do not stiffen up and also improves your general physical condition. By contrast, the old fashioned treatment of bed rest for back injury leaves you stiff and your muscles weakened. It can also lead to depression



Activity

v

Rest

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| ☺ Develops muscles | / | Muscles weaken / |
| ☺ Keeps you supple | | You stiffen up |
| ☺ Gives you stronger bones | / | Your bones get weaker / |
| ☺ Makes you fit | | You lose fitness |
| ☺ Improves general well-being | / | You get depressed |
| ☺ Releases natural chemicals that reduce pain | / | It gets harder to get going the longer you leave it |

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Pain Relief Treatments

Treatments for pain relief

People often take medicine to help their pain. Here is some information about the most common types of medications and also other ways that people have found helpful to manage pain.

It is important to be realistic though, as these treatments rarely provide a magic cure. **It is what you do for yourself in getting moving again and getting active that matters most.**

Painkillers

You can buy some painkillers, such as paracetamol, in a pharmacy. Paracetamol is safe if you follow the directions on the package. If you are also on other medications, the pharmacist can advise you on what it is best for you to take. Stronger painkillers, such as codeine, can cause nausea, vomiting, drowsiness and constipation. If you take drugs like codeine regularly, you are likely to begin needing them in order to feel well (you become dependent on them). This means that if you stop taking them you get withdrawal symptoms.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)

Drugs, such as ibuprofen, help pain and reduce inflammation of sore tissue. You can get stomach pains, diarrhoea, skin rashes, headaches and dizziness if you take NSAIDs. There is some evidence that these drugs can help to ease back pain.

Muscle relaxants

Drugs that relax your muscles also make you calm and sleepy. They include drugs such as diazepam (brand name Valium). Muscle relaxants can make you feel sick, dizzy or drowsy. It is possible to become dependent on these drugs if you take them for too long. We haven't found any studies on how well these drugs work to help back pain.

'Hot and cold'

This can be used for short term pain relief. In the first 48 hours a cold pack placed on the sore area for 5 to 10 minutes at a time can be helpful. Some people prefer heat, such as a wheat pack that can be warmed in the microwave or a hot water bottle.

Manipulation or mobilisation

This may help if done by a qualified professional, such as a Chartered Physiotherapist. You should feel the benefit quickly. There is no value in continuing these treatments for months on end. Manipulation and mobilisation work best if they are combined with getting active again.

Other treatments

Massage, traction, electrotherapy, acupuncture and alternative medicine are used for back pain.. If the treatment eases your symptoms and allows you to exercise and move more easily, then it may be helpful. There is no evidence of long term benefit from any of these treatments .

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Posture Advice

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Neutral posture



If you have back pain or a back injury you will find you are more comfortable if you can adopt a neutral posture while going about your normal daily activities.

A neutral posture means that you have 3 natural curves in your back: slight inward curves in your lower back and your neck and an outward curve in the middle of your back (the thorax). Your head should be balanced over your shoulders and your shoulders relaxed.

People who are stiff, uncomfortable or in pain often round and hunch their shoulders. They may either lose the curve or have an increased curve in their lower back.

A neutral posture in sitting means that you have a slight inward curve in your lower back and your head is balanced over your shoulders. Some people find it helpful to put a small cushion or folded jumper in the small of their back to support and maintain the inward curve

Poor posture



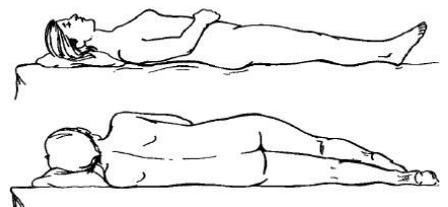
Poor posture



Neutral posture

Sleeping

Sleeping on your stomach is not necessarily bad for you. There is no 'best' position for sleeping. Sleep on a mattress that is firm, yet soft enough to conform to the normal curves of the body. The pillow should support your neck and allow it to rest in a balanced position. A feather or fibre pillow is best because it conforms to the shape of your neck better than foam.



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Exercises

These general exercises for your spine will help you to recover your normal mobility.



Stand straight with your feet apart.
Support your back with your hands while bending your back as far backwards as possible. Keep your knees straight during the exercise.
Repeat 3 times



Sit on a chair with your legs apart.
Bend your head and trunk down between your knees, rounding your upper body as much as possible. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds.
Repeat twice.



Stand straight with one hand on your hip and the other straight up.
Bend to the side with opposite arm reaching overhead. Keep your pelvis in mid-position.
Repeat 3 times to each side



Lie on your back with knees bent and feet together, arms out to the side.
Rotate your knees to the right as you turn your head in the opposite direction, repeat to the other side.
Repeat 10 times to each side



Lying on your back, use your arms to pull your knees up towards your chest.
Reach with your forehead towards your knees.
Hold for around 5 seconds then relax.
Repeat 5 times



In a crawling position, lift your opposite arm and leg to horizontal position.
Hold for 5-10 seconds. Try to keep your body still.
Repeat with the other arm and leg.
Repeat 10 times

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Resuming Activity

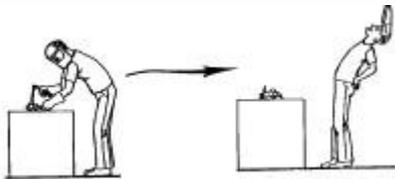
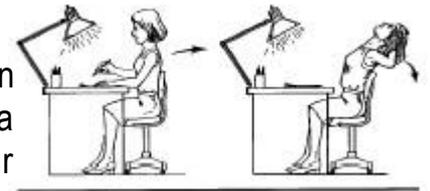
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To get better faster you should try to go about your normal daily activities and if you work you should return to work as soon as possible.

It often helps to discuss the problem with your manager or supervisor if parts of your job are uncomfortable to do. Offer suggestions to overcome these problems for a few days. You should be able to manage most normal activities quite quickly, usually within a couple of weeks. If not, you MUST call the helpline and request additional help to ensure that you become fully active again.

Tips that will help you both at home and at work are:

Sit in a neutral posture. Stand up and walk around for 5 minutes in every hour and STRETCH every 20 minutes. If you work at a computer make sure that you are in a neutral posture with your mouse close to you.



For jobs that require bending and stooping, stretch backwards to ease the strain every 20 minutes.

For lifting and handling tasks always do a risk assessment and use the POWER position. Keep loads that you are lifting and carrying close to your body. If you can, use a trolley rather than carrying for long distances.



Try to adopt a neutral posture to do tasks, such as kneeling to fill the washing machine rather than stooping, as this will help to keep your whole spine healthy.

It is a good idea to remember good posture for recreational activities too.



Keep Fit

The best way to prevent a recurrence of a musculoskeletal problem is to exercise regularly.
The biggest risk from exercise is not starting ...

Benefits of exercise

- ◆ Improves flexibility
- ◆ Improves cardiovascular fitness
- ◆ Improves your immune system ◆
- Helps control blood pressure ◆
- Helps control cholesterol
- ◆ Strengthens muscles
- ◆ Strengthens bones
- ◆ Maintains healthy bones
- ◆ Helps weight control
- ◆ Improves skin tone
- ◆ Improves sleep patterns
- ◆ Increases self-esteem ◆
- Aids relaxation
- ◆ Relieves stress
- ◆ Increases productivity

30 minutes of moderate intensity activity or activity that causes small increases in breathing and heart rate is recommended on most, if not all, days of the week.

The activity should involve the large muscle groups (walking, cycling, swimming, dancing, jogging, etc).

For moderate endurance exercise, simply walk a little further each time you exercise and gradually increase the pace of your walks as the weeks pass. For strength exercise, lift a weight that you usually lift but do it more times than usual.

Before beginning an aggressive exercise programme you should see your doctor or an exercise professional for screening tests and programme advice.

The key to success in any exercise programme or plan is to find activities that you enjoy and that you will want to participate in. Once you have found an activity you enjoy it will become much easier to gain the benefits associated with regular exercise.

Exercising with a group can be fun and beneficial. Sometimes exercising with other people is such fun that you are more likely to continue your fitness programme.

You should always be able to catch your breath and speak comfortably while exercising. It is also normal to sense effort and maybe even discomfort.

EXERCISE REDUCES:

- ◆ Risk for heart disease ◆
- Risk for stroke
- ◆ Risk of developing diabetes
- ◆ Risk for osteoporosis in females and males ◆
- Depression and anxiety