

Lower Back Pain

SELF-CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO. 1

This fact sheet helps you know what is normal and what you can expect to happen if you suffer from back pain. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional, so that you can work together to find the best way forward.

Useful facts

What is lower back pain?

Lower back pain describes tension, soreness and/or stiffness in the lower back, in most cases without a specific underlying cause.

How common is back pain?

Lower back pain affects 8 out of 10 people in the UK at some time in their life.

Are my symptoms likely to be serious?

No, lower back pain is rarely due to a serious underlying cause, even if you are in quite a lot of pain. See 'When to seek help' on page 2.

Do I need to rest?

Backs are made for moving. Keep moving, it may hurt but gentle activity won't make it worse and will help you get better faster.

What can I expect to happen?

How long are my symptoms likely to last?

Your back is likely to get better by itself, it is normal though to have small aches for a while, even as you recover.

60% of people recover within 6 weeks. 80-90% recover within 12 weeks.

Do I need any medical treatment or surgery?

Back pain usually gets better without medical treatment or surgery, even when a 'slipped disc' is responsible.

Will I need further tests?

You are unlikely to need scans, X-rays or any other tests, unless your clinician suspects a more serious cause.

Treatment for lower back pain

Painkillers:

- **'Rub-on' (topical) treatments**, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID) for pain relief, such as ibuprofen are a safe first line option and effective in most cases.
- **Anti-inflammatory tablets** such as ibuprofen may help if you need them, but they are not suitable for everyone. They can cause stomach, kidney or heart problems to check with a pharmacist or clinician if you are unsure.
- Paracetamol alone is not recommended for back pain but it may be used with another painkiller.
- Stronger painkillers, such as opioids are not routinely recommended, unless advised by a clinician when simpler ones are not working.

Ask a member of your pharmacy team for advice and always read the information about allergies on the pack or the patient information leaflet included.

Other treatments: Hands-on treatment such as spinal manipulation may help when combined with exercise. Physiotherapy, osteopathy or chiropractic - make sure they are registered.

In some areas of the UK a self-referral system is available for physiotherapy. [More details are here.](#)

Acupuncture is not recommended for lower back pain.



What can I do myself to get better - now and in the future?

Keep moving: Avoid lying down and remain active as much as possible, even if you are uncomfortable. Stay positive and keep doing things you enjoy.

Back exercises: Simple back exercises, improving your posture, yoga and the Alexander Technique can be helpful.

Heat and cold: A hot bath or hot water bottle can ease pain from tense muscles, while cold from an ice pack or a bag of frozen peas (wrap in a wet cloth and apply to the painful area) can help relieve discomfort from sudden back pain.

Sleeping position: Take the strain off your back by trying different sleeping positions and putting a pillow between your legs or under your knees if you prefer lying on your back.

Lift carefully: Lift close to your body, bend your knees instead of your back, and try to avoid lifting heavy items.

Work: Try to stay at work or return to work as soon as you can. If you take time off, talk to your employer about options such as a phased return to work, altered hours, amended duties or workplace adaptations.

Your GP can help with issuing a fit note if you need to stay off work for more than a week.

When to seek help

If your symptoms do not start to improve within 3 days, if your back pain recurs regularly for more than 6 weeks or if you are concerned, contact your GP surgery.

Call your GP surgery or NHS111 if you notice any of the following symptoms, which may suggest that your back pain could possibly be caused by a more serious underlying condition:

- **Pain getting worse:** You have severe pain that gets worse rather than better.
- **Feeling unwell:** You feel really unwell from your back pain.
- **Fever:** You have a fever (a temperature of over 38°C, or 100.4°F) as well.
- **Chest pain:** You have back pain that travels up into higher areas of your chest.
- **Injury:** Your pain started after a major injury (such as a fall or an accident).
- **Age:** You have new back pain, and you are younger than 20 or older than 50 years.
- **Sleep problems:** Pain that wakes you at night.
- **Walking:** You have become unsteady on your feet since your back pain started.
- **Weight loss:** You have also been losing weight for no obvious reason.

The following symptoms suggest an emergency:

- **Unusual sensations:** Numbness around the genitals and/or buttocks or you notice 'pins and needles' in this area or both legs.
- **Urine problems:** Difficulty passing urine or you cannot keep your urine in.
- **Bowel problems:** You lose your bowel control.

Where to find out more

A member of your pharmacy team can help with pain relief and advice.

Or, visit these reputable websites for more information:

[NHS Inform, Scotland:](#)

[NI Direct, Northern Ireland:](#)

[NHS 111, Wales:](#)

[NHS Website:](#)

[Pain Toolkit:](#)

