

## **For patients: Advice for patients who are within the first six weeks of their back pain (including patients who have a recurrence of long-standing back pain)**

Most back pain is not due to any serious disease. Most back pain also settles quickly without treatment. Despite the pain, the best way to help your back is to stay active.

### **What are the causes of back pain?**

Most back pain comes from the ligaments, muscles and joints in your back. Very few people have actual damage to their spine (including a slipped disc or a trapped nerve).

In most people, it is difficult for health professionals to identify the exact source of the pain. This can be frustrating for the sufferer, who should be reassured that back pain is usually not 'serious' for their long-term health.

### **Can having an X-ray help with the diagnosis?**

X-rays have not been found to be useful in the diagnosis of acute low back pain. Most X-ray findings in your back are normal age-related changes and nothing to worry about.

### **What should I do if I have acute back pain?**

At first, if the pain is bad, you might need to change what you normally do – either just doing a little bit less than usual or you might need one or two days' bedrest. However, bedrest is no longer used as a treatment for acute back pain - research has actually shown that more than two days' bedrest can slow your recovery.

### **How can I control the pain?**

To help you get going and able to use your back normally, you might need to control the back pain. Many treatments can help back pain including:

- The use of an ice pack or heat pad over the sore area for just 10 minutes – make sure that it is in a cover to prevent ice or heat burns.
- The sort of over-the-counter painkillers you use for 'everyday headaches and colds' – these include aspirin, paracetamol and ibuprofen – these can also have anti-inflammatory effects, which can be useful for healing. Some people can't take certain types of painkillers, if you are concerned, please ask your pharmacist or general practitioner for advice.
- Other treatments such as the physical manipulation of the back can be beneficial. This can be provided by the following professionals: physiotherapists, osteopaths or chiropractors

### **Stay active!**

The best thing for your back is to get it moving and working normally again.

- As soon as possible, build up your activities back to normal levels. This might take you several days or weeks.
- Avoid staying in one position or doing anything repetitive without a break for more than about 20 to 30 minutes. Over time, as your pain settles, you can try to increase the amount of each activity.
- Start exercising gently as soon as possible – walking, swimming, or using a cycle are good ways. Expect to feel sore when you first start, so build up the time and intensity gradually.

- Try not to take time of your work or studies – near-normal activity will be good for you. If you have had to take time off work, get back to work as soon as possible. If necessary, ask if you can do lighter duties until you feel more confident (eg for a week or two).

**Things to look out for if you have acute back pain:**

- If you have severe back pain, which gets worse over time, or you feel unwell with your back pain, consult your doctor in the next day or two. This might be a warning of more serious conditions.
- If you suddenly develop any of the symptoms listed below, you should see a doctor straight away:

Difficulty controlling or passing urine;  
Numbness over your genital area or 'back passage';  
Altered sensation or weakness in both legs;  
Unsteadiness when you walk;

NB: these symptoms are very unusual for people who have back pain.

**Remember:**

Back pain is **rarely serious** and the best thing you can do is get active and restore normal movement and function to your spine as soon as possible.

This information is modified from *The Back Book*, which is based on the latest research and provides the best and most up-to-date advice. Copies may be obtained from The Stationary Office 2002: ISBN 0-11-7029505

**Further information**

**NHSDirect:** Website: [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk) has useful information about 'Back Pain' including links to other free 'Resources' eg:

**BBC Back Pain Guide:** Website: [www.bbc.co.uk/health/backchat/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/backchat/)

**BackCare** – the charity for healthier backs. Contact: 16 Elmtree Road, Teddington, Middlesex, TW11 8ST; Tel: 020 8977 5474; Fax: 020 8943 5318; Website: [www.backpain.org](http://www.backpain.org)