

# Low Back Pain

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you suffer from back pain. It also tells you when you should become concerned and when it's best to seek advice from a health professional.

## Useful facts

- **What is lower back pain?** Low 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?** You're not alone – low 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, low back pain is rarely due to a serious underlying cause, even if you're in quite a lot of pain.
- **Do I need to rest?** Backs are made for moving. Despite your pain, try and get back to normal activities as soon as you can – the sooner, the better.

## What can I expect to happen?

- ✓ **How long are my symptoms likely to last?** Your back is likely to get better by itself within 6 to 12 weeks, and often sooner. But you may experience occasional twinges and aches for weeks and months.
- ✓ **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're unlikely to need X-rays or any other tests.

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

- ✓ **Back exercises** Simple back exercises, improving your posture, yoga and the *Alexander Technique* can be helpful (see <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Back-pain/Pages/Prevention.aspx>).
- ✓ **Keep moving** Avoid lying in bed and remain active as far as possible, even if you're uncomfortable. This won't harm your back, and you can expect to get better more quickly. Stay positive and keep going out to do things you enjoy.
- ✓ **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.
- ✓ **Painkillers** 'Rub-on' (topical) treatments and pain killers such as paracetamol and ibuprofen are effective in most cases. Stronger medicines, such as codeine,

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are an additional option when simpler ones are not working. Ask your pharmacist for advice.

- ✓ **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.
- ✓ **Lifting** 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 and together with our employer consider options such as a phased return to work, altered hours, amended duties or workplace adaptations. Your GP can help with issuing a sick note (now called 'fit note') if you need to stay off work for more than a week.
- ✓ **Other treatments** Physiotherapy, acupuncture or seeing a chiropractor or osteopath can also be helpful (make sure they're registered).

### When should I seek medical help?

If your symptoms don't start to improve within three days, or if your back pain recurs regularly for more than six weeks, contact your GP surgery. Seek immediate medical advice if you notice any of the following warning signs, 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're younger than 20 or older than 50 years.
- **Sleep problems** You have night-time pain that affects your sleep.
- **Walking** You've become unsteady on your feet since your back pain started.
- **Weight loss** You've also been losing weight for no obvious reason.

**The following suggest an emergency:**

- **Unusual sensations** You feel numb or notice 'pins and needles' in the area around your bottom (the 'saddle area'), your genitals, or both of your legs.
- **Urine problems** You can't keep your urine in.
- **Bowel problems** You lose your bowel control.

### Where can I find out more?

**NHS Website** (<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Back-pain/Pages/Introduction.aspx>), **Choose Well** ([www.choosewellmanchester.org.uk/self-care](http://www.choosewellmanchester.org.uk/self-care)) and the **Pain Toolkit** ([www.paintoolkit.org](http://www.paintoolkit.org)) provide further information on managing your back pain. Remember that your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your symptoms.

