

Low Back Pain

Patient Information Leaflet

MSK Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy Service



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www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/

What is low back pain?

Low back pain is very common. Around 80% of adults will experience back pain at some point in their lives. Some people may experience back pain more frequently. Back pain can hurt a lot but it is **rarely caused by anything serious**.

Are there different types of low back pain?

Yes – back pain is usually classified as either **specific** low back pain or **non-specific** low back pain.

Specific low back pain is much rarer. Less than 1% of all low back pain is due to a specific cause, such as: cancer, infection, inflammation of the spine or a broken bone.

Around 5% of people with low back pain will also have pain in one or both legs. This may be the result of irritation of the nerves in the lower back, which can lead to pain, altered sensation or weakness in the legs.

This is very reassuring and means that most cases of low back pain are not due to a specific, worrying cause. This is called **non-specific low back pain** and some potential causes of this are highlighted below.

What causes non-specific low back pain?

Some common causes of low back pain are:

- muscle pain – this can be from lifting awkwardly, a sporting injury or work activities
- age-related changes – also known as spondylosis
- sudden changes in activity levels – doing much more than usual or being much less active can cause pain
- poor sleep, stress, low mood, or feeling run down can also make pain worse
- other conditions such as osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis or fibromyalgia

Sometimes back pain starts slowly, and we don't know why. Even then, **scans are usually not needed** and do not change treatment. The good news is that **most back pain improves within a few weeks**.

What are the symptoms?

Everyone's symptoms are different, but you may experience:

- aching or stiffness in your lower back
- pain that spreads into the hips, buttocks or legs
- pain when bending or moving
- stiffness after sitting or resting for a while

It is normal for pain to change day to day. This does **not** mean you are doing damage.

Do I need tests or scans?

In many cases, scans are not usually needed to diagnose or manage your low back pain. In fact, guidelines advise against the use of x-rays or scans unless a specific, worrying cause is suspected.

Scans and x-rays show what your joints, muscles, tendons, ligaments and nerves look like, but they cannot tell us:

- how much pain you are in
- exactly where the pain is coming from
- how well you can move or function

Many scan results show normal changes that happen as we get older. The table on the following page summarises some of these normal age-related MRI findings by age.

These changes often **do not cause pain**. Therefore, scans can sometimes cause **unnecessary worry** without changing your treatment.

Percentage of individuals **without** back pain that show age-related findings on MRI:

Findings	Age (years) of individuals WITHOUT any back pain						
	20	30	40	50	60	70	80
<i>disc degeneration (the discs lose a bit of fluid)</i>	37%	52%	68%	80%	88%	93%	96%
<i>disc signal loss (the disc contains less water)</i>	17%	33%	54%	73%	86%	94%	97%
<i>loss of disc height (the disc shrinks a bit)</i>	24%	34%	45%	56%	67%	76%	84%
<i>bulging discs (a small bit of the disc changes shape)</i>	30%	40%	50%	60%	69%	77%	84%
<i>disc protrusion (the disc changes shape)</i>	29%	31%	33%	36%	38%	40%	43%
<i>annular fissure (the disc has a scratch on it)</i>	19%	20%	22%	23%	25%	27%	29%
<i>facet degeneration (the small joints change shape)</i>	4%	9%	18%	32%	50%	69%	83%
<i>spondylolisthesis (1 vertebra bone moves forward on another)</i>	3%	5%	8%	14%	23%	35%	50%

Brinijki et al. 2015

Management and self-help

Most new back pain will improve within **6 to 8 weeks**.

Following some of these useful tips should help:

Change your activity levels

It is **not** recommended to completely rest when you experience low back pain. For the first few days of feeling the pain, it is ok to reduce your activity levels and take things a little easier. However, staying as active as possible and returning to your usual activities as soon as possible helps recovery.

People will often become protective of their back when experiencing pain, through fear of making things worse. It is normal for people to move differently in the first few days of having back pain, but if this altered movement continues long-term, it can become unhelpful and may affect your recovery.

Although it may be painful initially, gradually getting yourself moving again in a relaxed way will help your recovery.

Exercise

Exercise is known to be very helpful in managing back pain and is an effective strategy for preventing back pain recurring in the future. However, when people experience pain, they often reduce their activity and stop doing things they enjoy.

This can lead to a pain-inactivity cycle:



National guidelines recommend a minimum of **150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic exercise per week**. This is exercise that raises your heart rate and gets you breathing more heavily.

Guidelines also recommend **strengthening activities are performed at least twice a week.**

Starting slowly and gradually building up both the amount and intensity of what you do is important. Some muscle soreness is normal when you start exercising and an increase in **pain is rarely a sign you are causing harm and does not necessarily mean you need to stop.**

There is no one specific exercise that is more effective than another. The best form of exercise is one that:

- you enjoy
- you can afford
- you can keep up with
- fits in with your daily schedule

Simple pain relief

Pain relief alone is not the answer, however when coupled with exercise and keeping moving, it can be helpful in the early stages. Speak to a pharmacist or GP for advice before taking pain relief medication.

Exercise also releases hormones called endorphins, which are your body's natural, self-made painkillers. This is one of the reasons why exercise can be so beneficial.

You may also get relief from applying heat or an ice pack to the painful area. Please ensure you use something to protect the skin if you try this.

Stay at work or return as soon as possible

Being off work for long periods of time can be detrimental to our overall health and wellbeing.

Staying at work is likely to be beneficial long term, however you may need to speak to your employer or GP to discuss adjustments to help you at work.

Ensure you get a good night's sleep

Sleep is very important for recovery. This is because it reduces stress and improves your overall feeling of wellbeing.

Most people feel best with about 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night, but everyone is different. There is no single best position to sleep in or best type of mattress, everyone is different, so finding what is most comfortable for you is often best.

For more information on sleep, how it affects pain and ways to help, please visit:

www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/health-and-wellbeing/

Look after your mental wellbeing

How you feel can directly impact the amount of pain you feel. Stress, low mood and anxiety can all contribute to your pain. Everyone experiences a degree of stress on a daily basis, and a certain amount of stress is good for us. However, too much stress, or being exposed to stress over a long period of time can become a problem. Taking time for relaxation and doing things you enjoy is important.

For more information on mental wellbeing, how it affects pain and ways to help, please visit:

www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/health-and-wellbeing/

Maintain a healthy weight

Maintaining a healthy weight is important for the management of many health conditions, including low back pain.

Carrying excess weight can place a greater strain on the body and increase chemicals that lead to inflammation, which may increase pain. Therefore, weight loss can be helpful for people who are overweight.

Stop smoking

People who smoke tend to experience back pain more often than those that do not. Reducing or stopping smoking can benefit not just your back pain but your overall health.

Speak to a healthcare professional who can signpost you to services to help you quit.

Flare-up management

During your recovery, setbacks are normal and part of the recovery process. They may happen because of something you can identify, such as an illness, life events or injury, but a lot of the time we do not know why they occur. It is important not to panic, as this will often settle.

If you do experience a flare-up:

- Reduce your activity levels for a few days, but do not completely stop or rest. As things start to settle, you can slowly increase your activity levels.
- Stay as active as possible and use simple pain relief strategies such as heat or ice.

You may wish to speak to a pharmacist or GP about short term pain relief.

Should I refer myself to physiotherapy?

You may benefit from physiotherapy if:

- your pain is not improving after a few weeks
- you are struggling to return to work or normal activities
- you keep getting episodes of back pain
- you would like advice on exercises and recovery

When should I seek urgent medical advice?

Back pain is rarely serious, however you should **go to A&E immediately** if any of the following symptoms have started **within the last 4 weeks**:

- altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- inability to stop a bowel movement or leaking
- increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of urine
- increasing difficulty when you try to urinate
- leaking urine or recent need to use pads
- loss of feeling or pins and needles between your inner thighs or genitals

- loss of sensation when you pass a bowel motion
- loss of sensation when you pass urine
- not knowing when your bladder is either full or empty
- numbness in or around your back passage or buttocks
- severe weakness in your legs or your ankle is not moving properly when walking

You should contact your **GP or call 111 urgently** if you have:

- new, unexplained lower back pain, accompanied by a history of any of the following
 - cancer
 - HIV
 - TB (Tuberculosis)
 - inflammatory arthritis
- lower back pain combined with any of the following
 - feeling unwell
 - a loss of appetite
 - fever
 - unexplained weight loss
 - night sweats

Common Low Back Pain Myths

There are many myths surrounding back pain. There is considerable and growing evidence that our beliefs and attitudes can directly influence pain and prognosis.

Here are some common misconceptions about back pain:

“...my back pain is due to something being out of place...”

No evidence suggests that bones or joints move out of alignment, or that discs pop in and out of place. X-rays and scans occasionally show some slight changes to alignment and disc bulges but these are generally not related to pain.

“...lifting and bending are dangerous...”

Research shows little association between bending and low back pain, meaning bending is safe.

“...the more pain I feel, the more damage I have done...”

This is not true. Pain is very individual, and different people will experience different levels of pain. High levels of pain do not mean high levels of damage. Pain is influenced by many different things, such as: previous pain experience, anxiety, fear, stress levels and our coping strategies.

“...exercise isn't safe for my back...”

This is also not true. Exercise is safe and one of the best things you can do for back pain. Regular and paced exercise is not only good for the body, but also good for the mind.

“...I must keep an upright posture...”

No specific posture is better than another. Different postures suit different people and slouching is not harmful for your back. It can be helpful to regularly move and change position throughout the day, avoiding prolonged periods sitting in one position.

“...I need an operation...”

Surgery is very rarely needed for low back pain and only when there is a specific cause identified.

“...my back pain is here to stay...”

Many factors are associated with back pain. The management of back pain involves addressing all the contributing factors, in doing so, this can help improve your symptoms.

Remember

Your back is strong and resilient. It is designed to move, bend, twist and lift.

Serious causes or permanent damage is rare.

Scans and x-rays are rarely needed to effectively treat your pain.

Staying active, relaxed and confident in your movement helps your recovery.

Most low back pain improves with time, movement and the right advice.

If you need help to understand this leaflet or would like it in a different language or format such as large print, Braille or audio, please ask a member of staff.



MSK Physiotherapy Service

Find out more about the MSK Physiotherapy Service and what we offer

www.leicspart.nhs.uk/service/musculoskeletal-msk-therapy-physiotherapy/



Further Resources

Access our other MSK Physiotherapy resources www.leicspart.nhs.uk/msk-physiotherapy-resources-getting-started/

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