

Low back pain: patient information

This leaflet incorporates guidance from the NICE clinical guideline on low back pain (see www.nice.org.uk/CG88) and provides additional and complementary information.

About low back pain

Low back pain is very common. Fortunately, most people find that it only lasts a few days or weeks.

The exact cause of low back pain is often difficult to find. Tension, soreness and/or stiffness are common symptoms. Joints, connective tissue and discs may contribute to the symptoms.

With the right information, support and treatment, most people find they can manage their low back pain.

Who is this leaflet for?

This leaflet explains what you can do to help you recover from low back pain and return to your normal activities as soon as possible.

It is aimed at people who have had low back pain (which can also affect the upper part of the legs) for more than 6 weeks, but less than a year.

It **isn't** for people whose back pain is caused by:

- cancer, a fracture, an infection or inflammatory disease (such as ankylosing spondylitis)
- irritation or compression of nerves that mainly affects the legs.

If you have any of the following symptoms as well as low back pain, see your GP immediately: muscle weakness in your legs; reduced feeling in your legs, buttocks or genital area; problems with bladder or bowel function; feeling generally unwell.

Diagnosis – finding out what's wrong

When you see your GP, physiotherapist, osteopath or chiropractor, s/he will ask you questions and examine you. Occasionally low back pain is caused by an underlying condition (such as cancer or a fracture) – if your GP thinks this is possible, you may be referred for a type of scan called an MRI. Otherwise you won't need an X-ray or an MRI scan, because they won't help to find the cause of your back pain or in deciding how best to treat it (and it's advisable to avoid unnecessary X-rays and scans).

What you can do

You can do the following things to help you to manage your low back pain, recover quickly and continue doing the things you like doing – they may also help if you get low back pain again in the future:

- **Stay active:** although the pain can make this seem difficult, maintaining and gradually increasing your daily activity can help your back. Rest when you need to, but avoid excessive bed rest because this will not help your recovery.
- **Regular medication:** taking painkillers will allow you to remain active – don't wait until the pain gets too much. Painkillers will not mask your body's warning signals or increase the risk of damaging your back.
- **Regular exercise and physical activity:** this helps to keep your back fit and healthy. Walking, swimming and yoga are popular, but it is important to do an enjoyable activity that you can benefit from without making your pain worse. Your physiotherapist, exercise professional, osteopath, chiropractor or GP can help you choose an exercise programme that suits you.
- **Change lifestyle factors:** check for everyday things that may be aggravating your back. These might include stress, repetitive and/or uncomfortable postures at work, at home or while driving, or long periods of sitting.

Treatment

There are a number of treatments available on the NHS or privately that can help you cope with your low back pain. It can be difficult to predict who might benefit from which treatment – your GP or healthcare professional should discuss the available options with you, and together you can decide how to manage your low back pain.

Your GP should advise you how you can use medication to manage your low back pain and may prescribe some specific painkillers.

Medication

Paracetamol is usually the first option you should try. If this isn't very effective, your GP may offer you a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID), such as ibuprofen, or an opioid, such as codeine (or occasionally both).

Tricyclic antidepressants are sometimes prescribed for low back pain because they are effective in reducing pain – they're not being used to treat depression or mental health problems.

Your GP will discuss possible side effects with you and help you to decide how long you should take medication for – this will depend on how well it works for you.

Intensive treatment programme

If the above treatments don't give you sufficient relief, you may be referred for an intensive programme of physical and psychological treatments. This is particularly recommended for people whose back pain is seriously affecting their ability to carry out daily activities, and who feel distressed and need help coping. Long-term pain can have a big impact on your mood, which in turn can have an effect on how you experience pain. This is where professionals trained in psychology can help.

Surgery

Only a very small number of people with back pain actually require and undergo surgery. But if you still have severe pain after an intensive treatment programme, you may be referred to a specialist for an opinion on whether you might benefit from a type of surgery called spinal fusion. In this situation you might have an MRI scan.

Other treatments

There are other treatments for low back pain, but because there is not enough evidence that they are effective they are not currently recommended for use in the NHS for this type of back pain.

More information

If you choose to have any of the treatments described in this leaflet with a private healthcare professional, you should ensure that they are registered with the appropriate regulatory body:

- Chiropractors: General Chiropractic Council www.gcc-uk.org
- Osteopaths: General Osteopathic Council www.osteopathy.org.uk
- GPs: General Medical Council www.gmc-uk.org
- Other healthcare professionals: Health Professions Council www.hpc-uk.org

When searching for additional information on how to manage your low back pain, it is important to check that the information is reliable and trustworthy. The following sources may be useful:

- BackCare: a national charity that helps people to reduce the impact of back pain by providing education, information and support (www.backcare.org.uk; 0845 130 2704)
- NICE: The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence has developed a booklet that tells you more about the treatment and care you can expect from the NHS for your low back pain (www.nice.org.uk/CG88publicinfo)
- NHS Direct: can give you advice on how to manage back pain (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk; 0845 4647)
- NHS Choices: provides further information about the causes and symptoms of, and treatments for, back pain (www.nhs.uk)

Choice of treatment

As well as giving you advice on low back pain, keeping active and medication, your GP or healthcare professional can also help you choose one of the following treatments, all of which have been shown to help people with low back pain:

- An exercise programme, usually in a group.
- A course of manual therapy, including manipulation.
- A course of acupuncture.

If you don't respond to the initial treatment, you may be offered an alternative treatment from this list.