

Further information

If you require any further information after reading this leaflet, please contact the Physiotherapy Department at

Warwick Hospital
Tel: 01926 608068

Stratford Hospital
Tel: 01789 205831 ext 5229

South Warwickshire 
NHS Foundation Trust

As a key provider of healthcare and as an employer, the Trust has a statutory obligation to promote and respect equality and human rights. This is set out in various pieces of legislation including: Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, Disability Discrimination Act (2005), Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and the Age Discrimination Act (2006)

Our information for patients can also be made available in other languages, Braille, audio tape, disc or in large print.

PALS

We offer a Patient Advice Liaison Service (PALS). This is a confidential service for families to help with any questions or concerns about local health services.

You can contact the service by the direct telephone line on 01926 600 054 or using the phone links which are available or calling in at the office located in the main entrance at Warwick Hospital.

PHYSIOTHERAPY SERVICE

Advice for Patients with Low Back Pain



Approved by
SWFT Patient
Information
Group

Low back pain is an extremely common condition affecting most of us at some point in our lives; however it is very rarely a permanent or serious problem. Scientific research is helping us to know the best ways to treat back pain in order to get better as quickly as possible.

What are the facts about back pain?

- Most back pain is not caused by anything seriously wrong.
- Sometimes back pain can last for quite a long time but usually it gets better. The acute pain often settles within a few days to weeks but aches and pains may come and go for several months.
- Many people will get a further attack of back pain within a couple of years but be able to return to normal life between attacks.
- Movement is good. Being active helps you to recover quicker and helps prevent back pain.
- Prolonged rest makes back pain last longer, and makes you stiff and weak.

What are the causes of back pain?

- Your back is extremely strong. It is held together by tough ligaments and muscles. It is very difficult to cause serious injury from normal activities. Simple strains of the back do not leave lasting damage or weakness. If you have pain it doesn't mean anything has come out of place.
- Most of us get some age related changes in our joints as we get older. This does not mean your spine is crumbling or that you have arthritis. It is a normal part of aging, like getting grey hair. If your doctor says you have arthritis in your spine it means these age-related changes are present.

When should I see my doctor?

Most back pain is short lived and not serious, however there are a number of warning signs that you should see your doctor about:

- Feeling unwell with back pain. For example having a temperature or sweating at night time.
- Difficulty passing or controlling urine
- Numbness around your back passage or genitals
- Numbness, pins and needles or weakness in both legs
- Unsteadiness on your feet, stumbling or tripping

Should I do exercises?

Your physiotherapist will probably have given you some exercises to do as part of your treatment. Make sure you do these regularly and properly. Exercises only work if you do them!

Do not do exercises that your friends or relatives have told you about. Exercises are individual to each patient. You wouldn't take someone else's medication, don't do their exercises!

If there is anything you are not sure about or that worries you about your back, ask your physiotherapist.

What simple steps can I use to help every day?

- Sitting: don't sit for longer than 30 minutes at a time. Sit in a firm chair with support in the small of your back such as a rolled up towel or small cushion. Avoid footstools and recliners.
- If you work at a desk, ask your employer for help in getting your working positions right or have a look at www.hse.gov.uk for further information.
- Driving: interrupt your journey. Adjust your driving seat so it supports your back in an upright position.
- Lifting: try to avoid if possible but if you have to lift use your legs and keep your back straight. Don't twist while lifting. Get help if possible.
- Carrying: several small loads are better than one big one. Take advantage of delivery services or internet shopping instead of heavy grocery loads.
- Sleeping: a moderately firm mattress should be fine; you don't need to spend a lot of money on expensive models. Try taking painkillers an hour before bedtime. Sex is fine but you may need to try different positions for comfort.
- Daily activities: change what you are doing at frequent intervals.

- X-rays are not usually helpful in diagnosing back pain. MRI scans are not necessary for most people with back pain either.
- Often it is difficult to make a definite diagnosis of the structures involved. However this is not a problem as far as treatment is concerned.
- Most pain is caused by the joints, muscles and other soft tissues of your back. Often this is because your back is not moving as well as it should and has become stiff. The solution is to exercise it better.
- Poor posture makes pain worse and is a major cause of back pain. Try to stand tall and sit up straight. Interrupt sitting at least every half an hour and get up and walk about. Avoid slouching in soft low chairs and sitting with your feet up. This puts more strain on your back.

Should I rest?

The old fashioned treatment for back pain was bed rest and supports. We now know that resting for more than a day or two makes back pain last longer because muscles weaken and joints become stiff. Keeping active is much better than rest. Regular exercise keeps your joints supple, muscles strong and makes you feel good by releasing natural chemicals that help to relieve pain. Even when your back is in acute pain you can try gentle walking, swimming or your usual sports and activities if you can manage them. It is a good idea to start gently and build up the intensity.

At first you may get some discomfort when you exercise, however this does not mean you are causing any harm or damage. The pain should ease as you get used to exercising regularly.

You can use painkillers to help you cope with starting to exercise but don't put it off, you'll just have more work to do.

How do I Deal with an acute attack of back pain?

- Use pain relieving medication or other measures to help you control the pain. Ask your doctor or a pharmacist for advice.
- Try to keep gently mobile. You may have to modify what you do temporarily.
- Try to stay active, go to work and get on with your normal activities if possible.

How do I achieve pain control?

- It is better to take painkillers so you can keep moving rather than try to do without and be unable to move. You will not do yourself any harm by masking the pain. Remember, your back is very tough and strong and you cannot damage anything with normal activity.
- Simple, over-the-counter painkillers work well for back pain, but you must take them regularly to keep the pain away. You may need them for a week or two. Ask a pharmacist or your GP if you are not sure what to take or are taking other tablets or medicines.
- Using heat or cold can be very effective in relieving pain. Remember though, it is not a substitute for exercise. Use whichever you feel helps you most. There is no right or wrong in terms of heat or cold.
- Relaxation is very effective in helping control pain. Stress and anxiety are well known to increase pain or prolong it. You may not be able to avoid the things that make you stressed but dealing with the effects by gentle breathing and relaxation can help.
- Try not to worry about your back. People may give you conflicting advice and stories about what has happened to others. Rely on the advice from this leaflet which is backed up by research.

What is chronic pain?

- You may be surprised to learn that developing chronic pain is related to what you do and think rather than the severity of what is wrong.

You are at higher risk of long term pain if:

- You avoid movement or activity because you fear doing damage
- You continue with rest and inactivity rather than getting on with your life
- You believe hurt means harm and that you will become disabled
- You believe you have a serious injury or damage despite reassurance to the contrary
- You become withdrawn or depressed

There is no need to wait for investigations, specialist opinions or appointments to start being active and taking positive steps to getting better. The sooner you start the lower your risk of long term pain.