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Information for patients Low Back Pain



Physiotherapy

About low back pain

Low back pain is very common and will affect many of us at some point in our lives. Fortunately, in the majority of cases it isn't a serious problem and will usually improve with time. The exact cause of low back pain can be difficult to identify. Tension, soreness and/or stiffness are common complaints and joints, soft tissues and discs may contribute to these symptoms.

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

Who is this leaflet for?

This leaflet explains what you can do to help yourself 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.

More detail on supported self-care can be found via the Trust website: rjah.nhs.uk > Our Services > Therapy > Supported self-care

The advice in this leaflet isn't aimed at back pain caused by;

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

(Physiotherapists may be involved in your care and routinely screen for the above conditions, as part of their assessment).

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:

- Physiotherapists – www.csp.org.uk
- GPs: General Medical Council – www.gmc-uk.org
- 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.

Other treatments

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

Further Resources

- NHS Choices back pain guide – advice on treating and preventing back pain
- Backache in pregnancy information
- BackCare website
- Versus Arthritis back pain information
- Versus Arthritis exercises
- Cauda Equina information cards
- Headspace online.

If you have any of the following symptoms as well as low back pain, see your GP or first contact practitioner (FCP) **physiotherapist 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 or physiotherapist, s/he will ask you questions and examine you. In the majority of cases you won't need an X-ray or an MRI scan. Investigations won't always help to find the cause of your back pain or decide 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 quicker and continue doing the things you like doing. They may also help if you get low back pain again in the future:

- **Keep moving:** although the pain can make this seem difficult, maintaining and gradually increasing your daily activity is the most important way you can help yourself if you have back pain. Be gradual in approach and avoid excessive bed rest because this will hinder your recovery. Regular exercise is associated with shorter and less frequent episodes of back pain. All types of exercise can be worthwhile, with walking, swimming, cycling, yoga and Pilates proving popular. Your physiotherapist can help to structure your exercise strategies. However, the 'best' exercise is something you can stick at long-term, so choose a mixture of things you enjoy!

- **Pain medication:** taking painkillers can allow you to remain active. Follow advice from a pharmacist or your GP, but don't wait until your pain is out of control before you take them. Painkillers will not mask your body's warning signals or increase the risk of damaging your back. Using hot or cold packs can also be beneficial for pain relief.
- **Consider lifestyle factors:** check for everyday things that may be aggravating your back. Important elements to address are trying to get enough sleep, eating a balanced, healthy diet, reducing your alcohol intake, stopping smoking and trying to reduce your stress levels. Relaxation strategies can help manage your pain, reduce stress and improve your sleep. Sometimes, repetitive and/or uncomfortable postures at work, at home or driving can influence your pain too. Avoiding long periods in sitting where possible and maintaining a healthy weight should be considered.

Treatment

There are a range of management strategies 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 Physiotherapist should discuss the available options with you, and together you can decide how to manage your low back pain. Exercise strategies should always be part of your management.

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

Medication

Simple, over-the-counter painkillers are often a good place to start to help manage your pain. If this isn't effective in combination with other strategies such as heat and exercise, your GP may consider other types of pain medication, such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) or weak opioids. 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.

Treatment options

As well as giving you advice on low back pain, keeping active and medication, your GP or Physiotherapist can also help you plan and structure a management plan. Management will always include an element of exercise and may also include advice, education, a course of manual therapy and individualised or group exercise. Sometimes, psychological therapies such as counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy may be included in your treatment plan, alongside exercise strategies, particularly if your pain has become persistent.

Surgery

A very small proportion of people with back/leg pain will require and undergo surgery. Your GP or Physiotherapist will refer you for a specialist opinion if necessary.