

## Emergency Department Discharge Advice

# Acute Back Pain

## Causes of back pain

For most people with back pain the cause is muscular, there isn't any specific, underlying problem or condition with the spine that requires further investigation or specialist treatment. However, a number of factors can increase your risk of developing muscular back pain, or aggravate it once you have it.

These include:

- Standing, sitting or bending down for long periods
- Lifting, carrying, pushing or pulling loads that are too heavy, or going about these tasks in the wrong way
- Having a trip or a fall
- Being stressed or anxious
- Being overweight
- Having poor posture

## Treatment of acute pain

### Pain relief

Taking a painkiller such as Paracetamol and an anti-inflammatory medicine such as Ibuprofen is often enough to relieve acute back pain. You can also use creams, lotions or gels that contain painkillers or anti-inflammatory ingredients.

### Activity

Stay active and continue your daily activities as normally as you can, taking care to avoid activities that cause back pain in the first place (see prevention section). Bed rest may make back pain worse, so try and limit the time you spend resting to a minimum.

### Heat packs

Apply hot or cold packs to the affected area. You can buy specially designed hot and cold packs from most pharmacies. If you prefer, you can apply a cold compress, such as ice or a bag of frozen peas, wrapped in a towel. Ice should not be applied directly to your skin as it can damage your skin.

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## Prevention of back pain

Good back care can greatly reduce your risk of getting back pain. To look after your back, make sure you:

- Take regular exercise – walking and swimming are particularly beneficial
- Bend from your knees and hips, not your back
- Maintain good posture – keep your shoulders back and avoid slouching
- Try to keep your stress levels to a minimum
- Keep your weight within normal limits
- Avoid carrying heavy loads (including children) – share the load with others

## Posture

### Standing

Imagine a string attached to the top of your head pulling you upwards. Relax your shoulders back and down, and they should be squared, rather than rounded and forward. Tuck your pelvis in so that your back has a slight curve rather than a hollowed out appearance. Relax your knees and let your feet take your weight equally.

### Sitting

When relaxing, choose a comfortable chair with enough space to change your posture regularly. Cushions behind your back will help support your spine.

### Lying down

Whatever position you lie in, try to ensure that it supports your back. You can use a pillow under your knees, a support such as a rolled-up towel under your lower back, or you can lie on your side with your knees bent.

Choose a mattress which doesn't sag and is supportive for you. Your pillow should be under your head, not your shoulders.

When getting up from a lying down position, draw your knees up first, roll over on to your side, and swing your legs off the side of the bed. Stand up by pushing yourself up with your hands.

## Activity in the home

The home is an environment where everyday activities are some of the most taxing on your back.

When cleaning the house, push the vacuum cleaner rather than pull. Use long handled implements when you can. If you are taking a bath try not to lie for too long in a rounded position.

In the garden try to keep your back straight all the time. Kneel whenever you can.

## You should see your GP if

The following symptoms may indicate a problem with your spine that needs further investigation or treatment. You should see your GP as soon as possible if you develop any of the following:

- A high temperature
- Redness or swelling on your back
- Pain down your legs and below your knees
- Numbness or weakness in one or both legs or around your buttocks
- Loss of bladder or bowel control
- Constant pain, particularly at night
- Pain that is getting much worse and is spreading up your spine

If your pain does not improve within 2 weeks you should see your GP to discuss whether a referral to physiotherapy may be helpful.