

Low Back Pain

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you suffer from back pain. It also tells you when you should become concerned and when it's best to seek advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

- **What is lower back pain?** Low back pain describes tension, soreness and/or stiffness in the lower back, in most cases without a specific underlying cause.
- **How common is back pain?** You're not alone – low back pain affects 8 out of 10 people in the UK at some time in their life.
- **Are my symptoms likely to be serious?** No, low back pain is rarely due to a serious underlying cause, even if you're in quite a lot of pain.
- **Do I need to rest?** Backs are made for moving. Despite your pain, try and get back to normal activities as soon as you can – the sooner, the better.

What can I expect to happen?

- ✓ **How long are my symptoms likely to last?** Your back is likely to get better by itself within 6 to 12 weeks, and often sooner. But you may experience occasional twinges and aches for weeks and months.
- ✓ **Do I need any medical treatment or surgery?** Back pain usually gets better without medical treatment or surgery, even when a 'slipped disc' is responsible.
- ✓ **Will I need further tests?** You're unlikely to need X-rays or any other tests.

What can I do myself to get better – now and in the future?

- ✓ **Back exercises** Simple back exercises, improving your posture, yoga and the *Alexander Technique* can be helpful (see <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Back-pain/Pages/Prevention.aspx>).
- ✓ **Keep moving** Avoid lying in bed and remain active as far as possible, even if you're uncomfortable. This won't harm your back, and you can expect to get better more quickly. Stay positive and keep going out to do things you enjoy.
- ✓ **Heat and cold** A hot bath or hot water bottle can ease pain from tense muscles, while cold from an ice pack or a bag of frozen peas (wrap in a wet cloth and apply to the painful area) can help relieve discomfort from sudden back pain.
- ✓ **Painkillers** 'Rub-on' (topical) treatments and pain killers such as paracetamol and ibuprofen are effective in most cases. Stronger medicines, such as codeine, are an additional option when simpler ones are not working. Ask your pharmacist



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