

Back pain

A service user's guide

Back pain is very common, affecting most people at some point in their lifetime. It can be sudden and feel very severe. It often lasts for 2-6 weeks but gradually improves over time. It is very normal for back pain to recur, in fact two thirds of people with back pain have another episode within 12 months.

The back is the strongest structure in the body, it is very robust and provides support for most movements.

Common symptoms of back pain include:

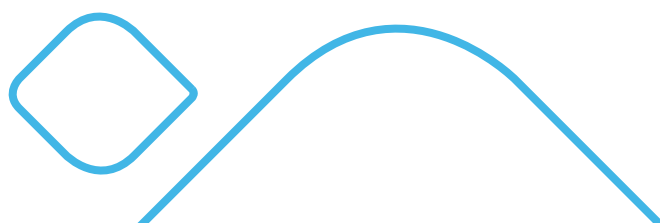
- Pain in your lower back.
- Pain in your hips or buttocks.
- Difficulty moving, reaching, bending or lifting.
- Stiffness in the morning, or after a period of rest.

90% of back pain has no specific medical cause. This is titled 'non-specific' by exclusion of other sinister and serious conditions.

Factors associated with flare-ups of lower back pain:

- A sudden increase or decrease in normal physical activity levels.
- Flare-ups of conditions like osteoarthritis or fibromyalgia.
- Periods of increased stress, worry, or low mood.
- Periods of poor sleep, fatigue, or feeling run down.
- A sprain or strain, e.g. lifting something awkwardly, or something heavier than your body is used to.

After suffering with pain for a long time, the body gets better at producing pain messages. The body becomes over-protective and over-sensitive, in anticipation of pain. The best way to overcome this is exposure with control.



How to help your back pain – exposure with control

For a while, it may be challenging to move into specific positions due to pain and stiffness in your back. It is important to keep moving regularly. It may be uncomfortable to start with, but this does not mean that you are causing harm to your back.

Try to remain in work or complete a gradual return with shorter hours or lighter duties.

Understanding the other factors influencing your pain is also important. Stress, fatigue, and feeling down have been shown to make the pain feel worse. Stay aware of this, keep a log of how you are feeling, and talk to others.

Ensure good sleep hygiene! Try not to use your phone within two hours of going to bed, use blue light or night light features, and keep your phone on silent at night.

Short courses of simple pain relief medication may also help and allow you to move more comfortably – speak to your GP or pharmacist about what you can take and when.

Some people may find applying hot or cold packs to the area helps soothe pain. Protect your skin with a towel and only leave the pack on for 10-15 minutes at a time.

Facts about back pain:

- Getting older is not a cause of back pain.
- Scans rarely show the cause of back pain.
- Pain with exercise and movement doesn't mean you are doing harm.
- Back pain is not caused by poor posture or a weak core.
- Injections, surgeries and strong drugs usually aren't a cure.
- The spine gets its nutrients and health through movement, it needs to move to heal.

This leaflet should only be used alongside advice from your physiotherapist. Please refer to our website (below) for further information and guidance on exercises that can be performed to help you with your back pain.

Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust
Combe Park, Bath, BA1 3NG

01225 428331 | www.ruh.nhs.uk

If you would like this leaflet in email form, large print, braille or another language, please contact the Patient Support and Complaints team on 01225 825656.

Date of publication: March 2025 Ref RUH PHY/087
© Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust