SOUTHAMPTON PHYSIO

PATIENT GUIDE

Back pain: a survivor's guide

What to do in the first few days, and how to tell if you need help

Back pain is one of the most frightening things an otherwise healthy body can do, and usually one of the least serious. I've had my share of it, and we see it every week in clinic.

This guide is the advice we'd give you in a first session. For most people, it's all you need. If it isn't, the last page tells you when it's worth seeing someone.

Ian Greaves, Principal Osteopath & Clinical Director

1 Don't panic

Most back pain isn't caused by anything serious, even when it's severe. A small strain can produce a lot of pain and muscle spasm. That's your body protecting the area. It works a bit like an overprotective smoke alarm: very loud for a small amount of smoke.

Most new back pain improves a lot within the first few weeks. It's common for a few niggles to hang around, or for it to flare up again months later. That usually isn't a sign of damage either.

Scans are rarely needed. Scans of people with no back pain at all often show "wear and tear", so a scan usually tells us less than you'd think.

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Get help now

Call 999 or go to A&E if you have:

- numbness or tingling around your bottom, genitals or inner thighs
- a new change in your bladder or bowel control, or in sexual function
- weakness in both legs

Call 999 if you have sudden weakness in an arm or leg, or sudden numbness down one side of your body, even if it passes.

Contact your GP urgently, today, if weakness in a leg is getting worse over days, or numbness is spreading.

See your GP soon, rather than waiting it out, if your back pain comes with a past cancer, unexplained weight loss, a fever or feeling generally unwell, a recent fall or accident, night pain that rest doesn't ease, or long-term steroid use.

Pain, pins and needles or numbness down one leg is common with back pain and usually settles. On its own it isn't an emergency. Get it checked if it's getting worse or spreading.

2 Keep moving

Rest feels like the sensible thing, but staying still usually leaves backs stiffer and slower to settle. Keep doing as much of your normal day as you can, even if you do it differently for a while.

- If you're sitting, get up every 30 to 45 minutes and move around.
- Short, frequent walks beat one long one.
- Try gentle movements that ease it: lying on your back and rolling your knees side to side, hugging your knees to your chest, or gentle bending and twisting.

How much is OK? Some pain while you move is fine, up to about four out of 10, as long as it settles back down by the next morning. If it goes higher, or you're worse the next day, ease off a little. You don't need to stop.

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3 Painkillers, used sensibly

Painkillers won't solve the problem, but they can take the edge off enough to keep you moving, and moving is what helps.

UK guidance (NICE) suggests an anti-inflammatory, such as ibuprofen, is worth considering for back pain. Paracetamol on its own isn't recommended for back pain, because on its own it doesn't help much.

Anti-inflammatories aren't safe for everyone. Ask your pharmacist first, especially if you have stomach, kidney or heart problems or asthma, take blood thinners, or are pregnant. They can tell you what's safe for you and how to take it. Stronger painkillers rarely help back pain much and have real side effects, so talk to your GP before using them.

4 Heat or ice

Use whichever feels better. Heat often helps tight, spasming muscles. Ice can numb the pain. There's no right answer. Wrap either in a towel and use it for 15 to 20 minutes at a time.

5 Get back to normal, gradually

You don't need to be pain-free to get back to work or your normal activities, and staying at work, with some changes if you need them, usually helps.

Treat each day as an experiment: how much can I do today? Build up a little at a time.

Bending and lifting are safe for your back, even if they're uncomfortable at first. Easing back into them is part of getting better.

Helping someone with back pain?

- Encourage them to keep gently moving, rather than staying in bed.
- Stay calm. Worry is catching, and most back pain isn't serious.
- Help with heavy jobs for a few days, but don't take over everything.
- Know the warning signs on page two, and act on them straight away.

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6 Look after the rest of you

Pain is affected by more than your back. Poor sleep, stress and worry can all make it worse, which is why back pain often flares on a bad week. Decent sleep, keeping in touch with people, and doing things you enjoy all help.

7 When it's worth seeing someone

Most back pain doesn't need a clinician. It's worth getting in touch if:

- it isn't improving after a few weeks
- it keeps coming back
- it's stopping you doing things that matter to you
- you're worried and want it checked properly

Good help should explain what's going on, give you a plan, check whether it's working, and tell you when you don't need it any more. Sometimes that's one session. Sometimes it's more. You should be told which, and why.

Not sure if you need us?

Book a free 15-minute call. No GP referral needed. If you don't need us, we'll tell you.

Call 023 8110 2077

Email team@southampton-physio.co.uk · Web southampton-physio.co.uk

Visit 35 Bedford Place, Southampton

Pass it on. Know someone whose back has gone? Send them this guide: **southampton-physio.co.uk/back-guide**