

How to stop your back being a pain

Posture is the key to prevention

Did you know that most people in the UK suffer from back pain at some point in their lives?¹ That means it is one of the most common health problems in the UK.

Yet the suffering it causes can be easily prevented, often by simply using correct posture and movement at home and work. There are also various treatments available that can significantly reduce the discomfort back pain brings.

Simple mechanical back pain

The pain is usually felt in the lower back and can often extend to the buttocks and thighs. It will come and go at different times and be affected by activity levels.

Common causes of back pain include:

- Bad posture
- Not enough exercise
- Standing, sitting or bending down for long periods
- Sitting in a seat without good back support, or sitting incorrectly and not using back support
- Lying on a bed without enough back support e.g. a sagging or very hard mattress
- Pushing, pulling, lifting or carrying things that are too awkward, heavy, or doing it incorrectly
- Tripping, falling or jarring.

Gentle exercise will aid your recovery, start slowly and regularly, building up over time.

Nerve root pain

This is a rarer type of problem and occurs when a nerve root of a 'slipped disc' is squashed. The pain usually sits in the lower back and can travel down one or both legs to the calves or into the feet, the leg pain is often called 'sciatica'.

Other causes

In very rare cases the underlying cause may be a more serious medical issue. If symptoms are unaffected by levels of activity, start gradually and are constantly getting worse over a long period of time or are accompanied by feeling unwell, you should get medical advice.

Although back pain may start abruptly, it can be the result of strain over a long time, rather than 'overdoing it' on one occasion. Usually there is no permanent damage and in most cases, correct movement can help prevent it.

Seeking medical help

If you are experiencing the following symptoms in addition to back pain, see your GP urgently:

- Pain down your legs and below the knees
- Numbness or weakness in one or both legs
- Loss of bladder or bowel control, or altered sensation in that area
- Redness or swelling on the back
- Fever.

You should also see your GP if pain:

- Lasts more than a week
- Results from an injury, fall or blow to the back
- Lasts more than a few days if you are aged under 20 or over 55.

Remedies

Keep moving

Recovery from simple back pain is no faster with bed rest – stay active and continue as normally as possible.

Moving may be uncomfortable, but it speeds up the healing process. If the pain is very bad, keep bed rest as short as possible and use the pain reducing interventions outlined below.

Medication and self help

Medication such as paracetamol and ibuprofen normally ease simple back pain.

A hot water bottle or an ice pack applied to the painful area can also help.

Manual therapy

Physiotherapy treatment usually involves manipulation, back exercises, massage techniques and other pain relief.

Physiotherapy can be helpful to speed recovery from back pain.

Osteopathy and chiropractic treatments involve manipulation of the spine and may provide relief for simple back pain.

Complementary intervention

The Alexander Technique may help improve posture and Pilates classes help to strengthen the deep postural muscles which support the back (and are always weak in those with back pain). Yoga is another discipline which strengthens and aids flexibility. Acupuncture can relieve pain. Counselling for psychological wellbeing may also be effective.

Lifting and carrying

- Test the weight of the load prior to lifting and make sure your route is unrestricted
- Only lift manageable loads or get someone to help
- Do not hold your breath
- Lift and carry close to your body and stand tall
- When lifting and putting down, keep your back straight, bend your knees and place feet apart
- Do not lift and twist at the same time, or twist whilst carrying – ensure that you move your feet and not your back.

Simple actions minimise risk

- Avoid a poor slumped posture
- Take regular exercise
- Make sure your furniture fits you at home and work. Sit properly on a chair/sofa with a backrest. Sit with your feet flat on the floor or on a foot rest
- Sleep on a firm supportive mattress not a rock hard one! You should feel that you sink into it a little as it supports your curves
- Don't ignore your body's warnings – aches and pains are telling you to check that you are following the above advice.

You may find the following websites and phone numbers useful:

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Backpain/Pages/Topbacktips.aspx

Back care Charity for healthier backs

Helpline number: 0845 130 2704

Back care National Office number:

0208 977 5474

www.backcare.org.uk/