

back and neck advice



The most up-to-date advice
from experts on how to deal with
back and neck pain

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back and neck advice

- Recover Quickly
- Stay Active
- Avoid Disability
- Seek the Right Help at the Right Time
- Lead a Normal Life

the new approach to back and neck pain

We have learned a lot about back and neck pain in recent years and there has been a revolution in its treatment. Health care providers now approach these problems in a different, more active way.

Many people have learned to deal with back or neck pain themselves, but sometimes one may need professional help. This booklet gives you the most up-to-date, research-based advice on how to deal with the pain, avoid disability, and recover quickly. It also gives advice on when to seek help.

some facts about back and neck pain

- Back and neck pain is very common. Four out of five people suffer from pain during their lives.
- Back or neck pain is usually not caused by any serious illness or damage.
- Most of these pains resolve quickly, at least enough to continue normal activity.
- Half of the people who get back or neck pain experience recurrent pain within two years. Still, this does not necessarily mean that it is a serious condition.
- If the pain is intense, you may need to reduce your activity for a while. But rest for more than a day or two usually does more harm than good. Stay active.
- People who recover the fastest and cope the best are those who stay active and get on with life. The human spine is designed for movement.
- If the pain is prolonged or recurs often, active rehabilitation through exercise is highly recommended to improve lost function and relieve the pain.

reasons for back pain

The spine is made of solid, bony blocks joined by discs to make it strong and flexible. Ligaments reinforce the spine, and powerful muscles surround it for protection. It is actually difficult to damage the spine.

separating fact from fiction

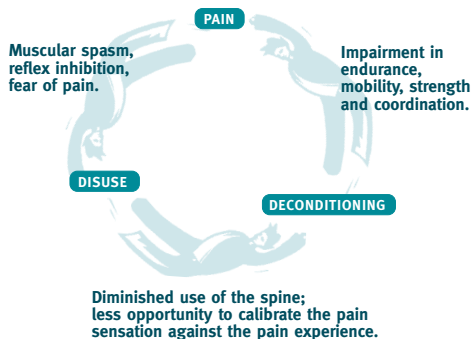
- Most people with back or neck pain do not have major spine damage.
- Very few people with back or neck pain have slipped a disc or pinched nerves. Even a slipped disc usually heals by itself.
- Most changes in x-ray or MRI images are normal changes related to age, like when hair turns gray.
- Even with today's technology, doctors cannot determine an overriding cause for back or neck pain, which may sound disappointing. Serious disease or damage to the spine, however, is rare. Very few patients need surgery for back or neck pain.
- Most pain arises from the discs, muscles, ligaments and joints in the spine. They are simply not working as they should, especially when lifting heavy loads or when put under pressure. You can think of the back or neck as "out of order," so the goal is to get the spine working properly again.
- Emotional stress can increase the amount of pain you feel. Tension can cause painful muscle spasms.
- People who are physically fit generally experience less back pain. If they do get it, they recover faster.
- The answer to back and neck pain is to get the affected areas into condition and physically fit!

rest or activity?

Rest is the old-fashioned treatment of choice for back pain. We now know that bed rest for more than a day or two harms the spine. This is due to many reasons:

- Your bones, muscles and ligaments soon weaken.
- Your spine stiffens and loses control and coordination.
- You lose general physical fitness.
- You may get depressed, causing the pain to feel worse.
- You will find it increasingly harder to get back to an active and normal life style.

You may need to restrict heavy physical loading and activity when the pain is bad, but the message is clear – bed rest is a poor solution. The most important thing is to get moving as soon as possible and remain active.



why exercise is good

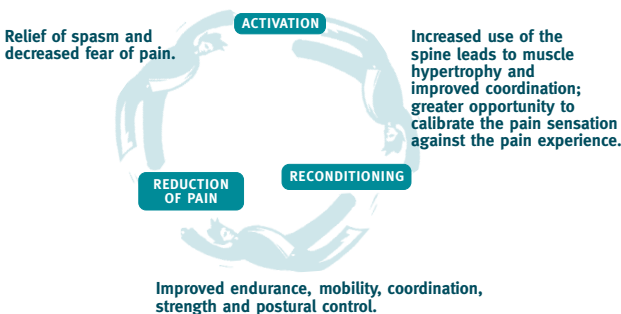
Regular Exercise:

- Makes you feel good
- Releases natural chemicals known to reduce pain

- Improves coordination and control of movement
- Builds fit muscles and stronger bones and ligaments
- Makes you generally fit

Even when your back or neck is sore, there are a number of activities you can start gradually without putting too much stress on the spine:

- Walking, biking or swimming
- Obtaining guided physical training if you feel unable to exercise on your own



staying active

You may have good days and bad days, which is normal. On a bad day, you can usually do something to control the pain and reduce your most strenuous activities, while staying active and working.

what if the pain worsens?

If you haven't been involved in an accident, it is unlikely that your back is damaged. What you do depends on how bad your back feels at the moment.

controlling pain

There are many things you can do to help lessen your pain. They may not eliminate the pain completely or cure your spine, but you can control pain enough to actively enjoy life. If these methods are not sufficient, you may benefit from guided active treatment, after which you can take better care of yourself.

Medication

Anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen or paracetamol are simple and safe painkillers. These are often the most effective, but they should be taken according to the directions for use.

Heat and cold

During the first two days it is recommended to apply a cold pack on the painful area for 5 to 10 minutes at a time. Some patients prefer heat such as a hot water bottle, a bath or a shower.

Manipulation

Most doctors now agree that manipulation can help with pain control, but it does not prevent the recurrence of pain. Manipulation is safe if done by qualified professionals such as osteopaths, chiropractors, and specially trained physiotherapists and doctors.

Other treatments

Other treatments are sometimes used to reduce symptoms due to back and neck problems. While these may offer some relief for a limited period of time, they may be expensive in relation to their long-term results. You are the best judge of what helps and what doesn't.

Releasing stress and tension

It is not always possible to eliminate the cause of stress, but it is possible to learn to reduce its effects with breathing control, muscle relaxation and mental calming techniques.

how to stay active

Back or neck pain is not a serious disease. It should not cripple you unless you let it do so. How the pain affects you depends largely on how you react to the pain and what you do about it. If you find it difficult to start activity, seek professional help. You will be able to get on with your normal life after a short, guided active treatment period.

two types of sufferers

Some people avoid activity while others cope with activity.

The avoider fears the pain and worries about the future, rests a lot and just waits for the pain to go away.

The coper knows the pain will get better. The coper does not worry about the future and deals with the pain by staying positive and active.

Avoiders suffer the most. They have pain longer, are out of work longer and can become disabled.

How to become a coper

- Live life as normally as possible – keep up daily activities.
- Avoid only exceptionally heavy tasks.
- Stay fit – start gradually and do a little more every day
- Be patient. Remember that you may have good days and bad days. Do not give up with the first recurrence of pain.
- Take control over your pain.

frequently asked questions about daily activities

	Ways to control pain	Things that may worsen the pain
Lifting	Think about what you are doing. Know your strength: lift what you can control. Always lift and carry close to your body.	Lift without thinking so that you end up hurting yourself.
Sitting	Use an upright chair supporting your spine. Get up and stretch every 20-30 minutes.	A low, soft chair. Lack of back support. Sitting for a long period. Sitting with head drooping.
Computer work	Adjust the screen so that your sight is slanted slightly downward. Adjust the keyboard in such a way as to ensure that you have support for your wrists and forearms	Poor adjustments of the keyboard and screen.
Standing	Vary your positions. Adjust your working surface to a comfortable height.	Long periods in one position
Sleeping	Many back patients prefer a firm mattress.	Staying in bed too long. Too little sleep.
Driving	Adjust your seat from time to time. Take breaks.	Long drives without a break.
Physical activity	Include both aerobic (i.e. walking, cycling, swimming or aerobics) and muscle activity in your daily program. Gradually increase physical activity.	Not exercising. Sitting around all day.
Relaxation	Learn how to avoid or reduce stress. Use relaxation techniques.	Worrying. Being tense.

when to see a health care provider

Most variations in back or neck pain can be addressed without medical attention. The symptoms often go away within a few days, but some situations require a doctor's care.

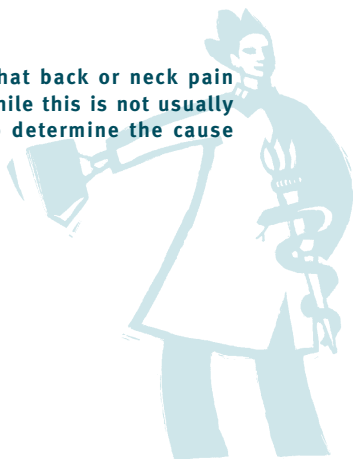
What doctors can and cannot do

Doctors can diagnose and refer you to someone who can treat rare or serious spinal diseases. But there is no such thing as a quick fix for back or neck pain. It is important to be realistic about what to expect from doctors and therapists.

Doctors and therapists can:

- Reassure you that you do not have a serious disease.
- Try different treatments to help control your pain.
- Advise you on how to cope with the pain and get on with your life.

It is natural to be concerned that back or neck pain is due to something serious. While this is not usually the case, your doctor can help determine the cause and its severity.





visit a doctor if:

- You have a fever in addition to intense back or neck pain.
- You cannot manage your daily activities.
- You have severe pain which worsens instead of improving over a period of weeks.
- The pain recurs often.

warning signs

If you do have back pain and suddenly develop any of these rare symptoms, you should see a doctor immediately:

- Numbness around crotch or genitals
- Difficulty in passing or controlling urine
- Numbness, pins and needles or weakness in both legs
- Unsteadiness while standing



when surgery is needed

Surgical operations are rarely needed for back or neck pain. There are two types of operations. The more common one is to relieve a nerve or nerves from compression due to, for example, a slipped disc. Another, less frequent type of operation is to fix an unstable part of the spine, a procedure called stabilization. One may need an operation due to symptoms described in the warning signs above, or because of intolerable pain that cannot be controlled with any other means of treatment.

pregnancy and back pain

Back pain is frequent during pregnancy, during which two simultaneous things occur. Hormonal changes loosen pelvic structures, and the foetus increases and distributes loading to the lower back in a different way. This often causes back pain which can be lessened with careful exercise. Always ask your doctor before you use any non-prescription medication.





what is active rehabilitation?

Active rehabilitation uses exercises as a method of treatment. The aim is to restore normal function of the back and neck. In most patients, the pain also decreases during the active treatment period.

You may need active rehabilitation if any of these symptoms occur:

- Your pain is intensive.
- You cannot manage your daily activities.
- The pain recurs often.
- The pain is prolonged or continuous.



what does active rehabilitation comprise?

After a doctor confirms that you do not have a serious disease, an individual treatment program can be designed. It consists of carefully planned exercises and guidance on how to deal with the problem and live a normal life.

Evaluations and measurements

Questionnaires and measurements are used to assess the severity of the back or neck problem, and to design an individual treatment program. The duration and content

of the program may vary depending on the type and severity of the problem.

Treatment

The treatment consists of active exercises with appropriate weights and motion. Guidance on how to use the spine and lead a normal life is another component of the treatment. The exercises are targeted to the trunk muscles and the motion of the spine, helping to restore mobility and control. Relaxation is an essential part of the program. After the guided program, you receive a plan on how to maintain the results long term. The attending doctor can follow your progress based on regular check-ups.



results you can expect

Doctors now agree that exercise and activity are the most effective means of controlling the symptoms of recurring or prolonged back and neck pain.

Pain relief

Some four out of five patients report pain relief during a three-month active rehabilitation program.

Mobility improvement

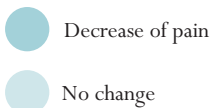
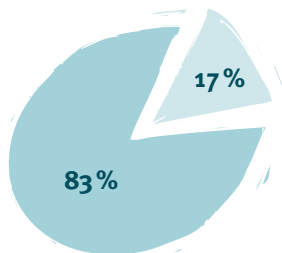
Mobility of the back and neck improves significantly.

Endurance improvement

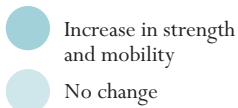
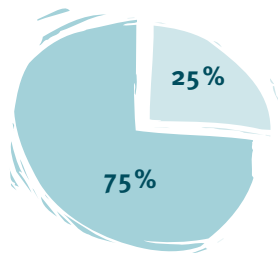
Improvement in muscle endurance helps you tolerate loading in daily life.

Psychological well-being

Improvement in mood and reduction in depression occurs in two out of three patients suffering from these symptoms.



Ref: Spine 24:1034-1042, 1999



Ref: Journal of Spinal Disorders 9:306-312, 1996

Duration of the results

If you remain active, you can expect results to last over a period of years. However, if you turn back to inactivity, your chances of having chronic pain in two years are fifty-fifty.

what to do after treatment

With the advice of this booklet and regular exercises to keep fit, you can get rid of your annoying back or neck problem. The goal is to stay active.

Take care of yourself.

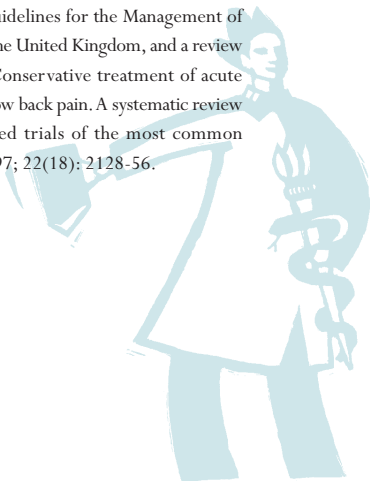


remember

- Back or neck pain is rarely due to serious disease.
- Even when the pain is intensive, it does not necessarily mean that there is any serious damage to the spine.
- Generally, the pain goes away with little or no means of pain control.
- Bed rest is usually a poor solution for your back.
- Regular exercise and staying fit and active improves your health and your back.
- If you cannot cope with the pain by yourself, you can seek help from active rehabilitation clinics.

The information in this booklet is partly based on the Clinical Practice Guideline, Acute Low Back Problems in Adults in the United States, the Royal College of General Practitioners Clinical Guidelines for the Management of Acute Low Back Pain in the United Kingdom, and a review article by Tulder et al: Conservative treatment of acute and chronic nonspecific low back pain. A systematic review of randomized controlled trials of the most common interventions. Spine. 1997; 22(18): 2128-56.

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