

Types of back pain



- **Neck pain** can include feelings of stiffness or tightness as well as sharp pain and, in severe cases, can reduce the movement of the neck and head. Although most common in people over 50, neck pain can develop at any age as the result of excess strain on the neck. This could include slouching, sleeping in an awkward position or working at a computer for long periods of time without a break. Neck pain can also develop as the result of an accident. Perhaps the best known is whiplash. Neck pain is rarely the result of a serious injury and will often lessen after a few days. If you are suffering from neck pain, try to keep moving and maintain your normal routine as best you can. Over-the-counter painkillers may also help.

- **Upper and middle back pain** refers to the area from the base of the neck to the bottom of your ribcage. This type of back pain is less common than neck or lower back pain as the bones in this area are not required to move and flex as much. One cause of back pain in this area is poor posture. Try to keep your back as straight as possible and balance your weight evenly on both feet. When sitting, keep your shoulders rolled back and be sure to adopt suitable positions when driving, sitting or using computers.

- **Lower back pain** is the commonest type of back pain with around 8 out of 10 people affected at some time in their lives. The lower back is defined as the area between the bottom of the ribcage and the top of the legs. Symptoms range from tension and stiffness to pain and soreness.

- **Pain in buttocks and legs (sciatica).** Sciatica is pain caused by irritation or compression of the sciatic nerve. The sciatic nerve is the longest nerve in your body and runs from the back of your pelvis, through your buttocks and all the way down both legs, ending at your feet. The most common cause of sciatica is a slipped disc. Most cases of sciatica will pass without the need for treatment. For persistent sciatica, you may be advised to try a structured exercise programme under the supervision of a physiotherapist. In rare cases, surgery may be needed to control the symptoms.



For more information, help and support go to www.choosewellmanchester.org.uk or visit NHS Choices at www.nhs.uk

Choose the right care

Keep moving - In the past, it was thought the best cure for back pain was to rest. We now know that rest can be harmful as it allows your muscles to weaken, delaying recovery. Staying mobile and keeping active is important for your recovery. Try not to let back pain interfere with your daily routine too much and return to work as soon as possible.

Painkillers - If back pain is so severe that it begins interfering with your daily activities, medication could be the next step. It is recommended that you first try over-the-counter medication like paracetamol. If that doesn't provide sufficient relief, try ibuprofen. In either case, make sure you are taking the painkillers as regularly as the dosage information recommends. Don't wait until your back pain is very bad. If you want any further advice on this, speak to your GP or pharmacist.

Manual therapy - Manual therapy is designed to provide physical relief for your symptoms and can be performed by a number of different types of practitioners. Perhaps the best-known example is a physiotherapist. There are many people offering back pain treatment and if you choose to arrange manual therapy yourself, there are a number of questions you should ask. Here is what the charity BackCare recommends you consider:

- Is there any evidence that the treatment is effective and safe?
- Who will perform the treatment?
Are they qualified or registered with a regulatory body?
- What are the possible benefits, risks and costs?
- Is the treatment appropriate for your condition and circumstances?
- Can you get information and advice on this type of treatment from multiple sources?
- Can you speak to anyone who has tried this type of treatment?

Hot or cold packs - Some back pain sufferers find relief by applying hot or cold packs to the affected area. If you think your back pain is the result of a sprain or a tear, try a hot pack first. If you think the pain is the result of an inflammation, a cold pack may be better. Hot and cold packs can be bought from pharmacies and can be left in the freezer until needed. Many can also be heated in the microwave; depending on the type of relief you need. Failing that, a bag of frozen peas or a hot water bottle will do the same job. It is not advisable to apply a hot or cold pack directly to the area, instead make sure it is wrapped in a thin piece of towel.

Stretching - If you are in the middle of experiencing an episode of back pain, some gentle stretches can help ease any discomfort and will help strengthen the muscles in your back. BackCare, the charity for healthier backs, has produced a leaflet on stretches for spinal mobility that should be performed daily.

You can find this leaflet on the BackCare website - www.backcare.org.uk. As well as stretching, research shows that exercise can be effective in reducing back pain. If back pain has become a recurring problem, exercising regularly will improve the strength of your back muscles and will become an important part of your coping strategy.



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Choose the right care

What to do next...



Choose care at home if...

- You have a history of back pain, back problems or surgery
- Mild or moderate pain that doesn't travel up or down your back or legs
- You can move normally, even with some pain
- You have a mild fever or flu-like symptoms



Choose your GP or GP out-of-hours service if...

- Your symptoms fail to improve within three days
- You have persistent pain that lasts longer than six weeks
- You have a high temperature (fever) of 38c (100f) or above
- You have a high temperature and vomiting
- You have unexplained weight loss
- You have constant back pain that does not ease after lying down or resting
- You have pain that travels to your chest or that is high up in your back
- You have pain down your legs and below the knees



Call 999 A&E if...

- Your legs start to become weak after an injury to your back
- You have a persistent loss of bladder or bowel control after an injury to your back



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Choose the right care