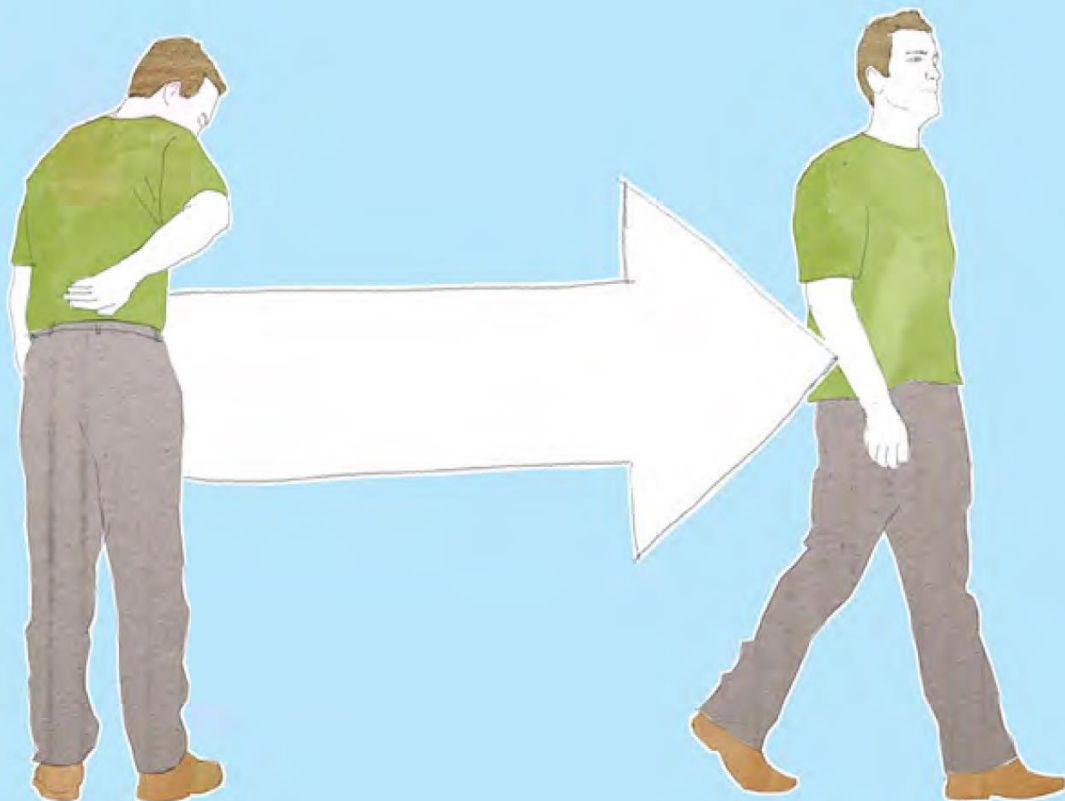


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# MANAGING YOUR BACK PAIN

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a guide for patients based upon the latest evidence



## WHAT DO WE KNOW?

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- Back pain is very common and normally gets better over a few days or weeks.
- Pain may last for longer than a few weeks, or may come and go. This does not mean your back problem is serious.
- Back pain is rarely due to serious disease or damage.
- Your spine is one of the strongest parts of your body and is surprisingly difficult to damage.
- The amount of pain felt is not related to the degree of damage – think of a paper cut!
- With the right information, support and treatment, most people can manage their own back pain.
- Maintaining and then gradually increasing your daily activity can help you to recover sooner.

## FINDING OUT

### WHAT IS HAPPENING

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When you see your health professional, they will ask you questions and examine you. Once they have checked that you don't have any serious damage or conditions they will often classify your back pain as 'non-specific' back pain. This is very common and means that the exact cause of the pain is not clear. In most cases it is due to a muscle and/or ligament strain or sprain.

*95% of all low back pain is 'non-specific'.*

For 'non-specific' back pain it is very unlikely you will need an X-ray or scan. These tests won't help us find a cause of your back pain or decide how to best manage your problem.

It's really hard to identify an exact cause of most common back pains. If this is the case it can be frustrating, but this is a good sign that no serious damage or conditions are present.

*We don't need to know the exact cause of most back pain to be able to treat it.*

## WHAT CAN YOU DO TO MANAGE YOUR PAIN?

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### STAY ACTIVE



Your pain might make this harder than normal, but we now know that maintaining and gradually increasing your daily activity can help you to get better sooner.

Moving your back may hurt but this does not mean you are causing more damage. Try to remember that “hurt is not the same as harm.”

*Pain and damage are not the same thing.*

You may have to take things a little easier at first and gradually build up over a few days or weeks.

Don't stop doing your normal activities – just change the way you go about doing them. If you do have to limit some of your activities, try to build them back into your life over a few days or weeks.

## STAYING AT WORK

*Try to remain at work, or get back to work as soon as possible.*

You may need to talk with your employer about changing your work duties, hours and workspace to allow for your recovery.

## AVOID PROLONGED BED REST

Bed rest is not a treatment and can make you worse. By not moving, your muscles and joints get weaker and stiffer and you lose your physical fitness.

*Don't overdo it, but try to avoid long periods of inactivity.*

## MEDICATION



Taking regular pain relief such as paracetamol is useful if it allows you to remain active. Don't wait until the pain gets too much. If your pain is very bad, talk to your doctor about suitable pain relief.

Medication will not increase your risk of damaging your back by masking your body's warning signals.

## HEAT OR COLD



Heat or cold packs can help to give you some relief. You will have to test which one works better for you.

## EXERCISE AND FITNESS



Regular exercise helps to keep you and your back fit and healthy.

Walking, cycling and swimming are popular, but it is important that you find an activity that you enjoy and that benefits you. This will help you to stay active long after you have recovered.

## CHANGE LIFESTYLE FACTORS

Check for everyday things that may be aggravating your back, such as repetitive and/or uncomfortable postures at work or home.

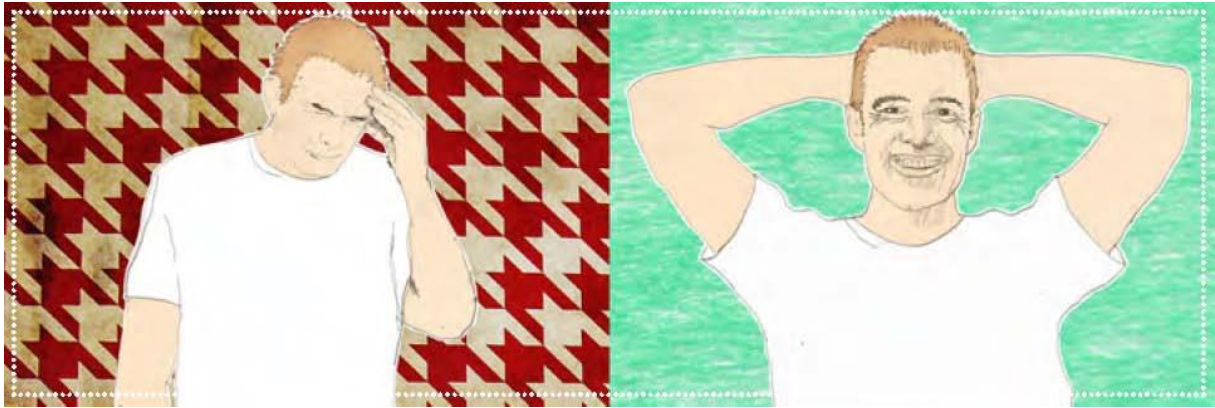
*Experiment with different chairs, positions, and seat adjustments*

Think about what postures make your pain better and use this knowledge to help manage your pain.

Remember a good rule for life is to not stay in one position for more than 20 minutes at a time.



## REDUCE STRESS AND TENSION



You may feel worried about your back. However this can cause more tension leading to more pain.

You can't always remove the cause of stress, but you can learn strategies to reduce how it affects you. This may help reduce your pain.

Try to do something that helps you relax such as listening to music or imagining something calm. Like all activities, the more you practice being calm, the better you get at it.

### TRY THIS EXERCISE

*Find a comfortable position*

- *Focus upon your breathing*
- *Slow and steady breathing*
- *'Let go' of tension as you breathe out*
- *This can take 10-15 minutes*

## WHAT ELSE CAN YOU DO TO HELP YOUR PAIN?

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If you are a smoker, consider getting help to quit. It has been shown that smoking can prolong your recovery.

Eat a healthy diet and aim for a healthy weight. This can help to reduce the physical stress upon your back.

## COPING OR AVOIDING

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People can often be described as either avoiders or copers in how they think about and manage their pain.

How you think about your pain can affect your recovery. This is good news - you can 'change your mind' about how you manage and recover.

### **THE AVOIDER:**

- fears their pain and worries about the future
- thinks that pain means more damage
- rests and waits
- waits for someone else to fix it for them

Avoiders tend to have pain for longer.

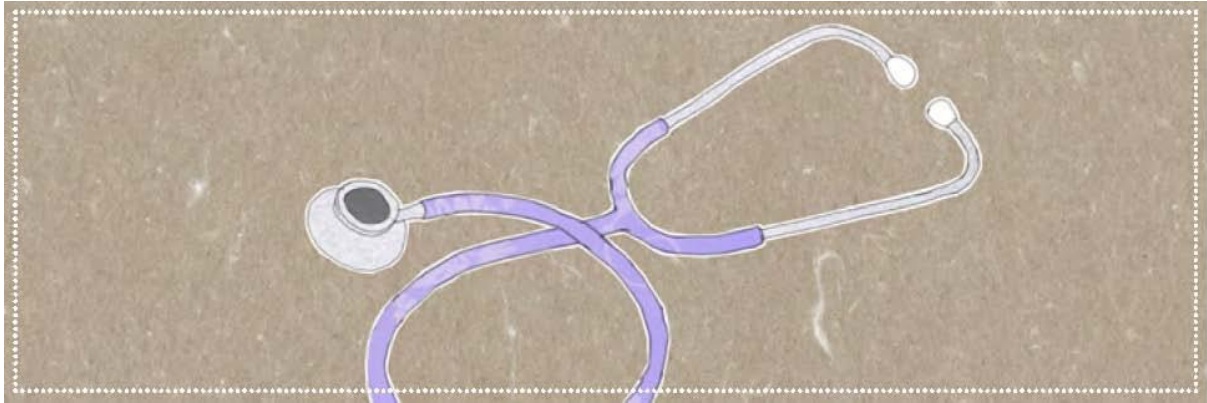
### **THE COPER:**

- focuses on getting better
- carries on living as normally as possible
- stays positive and active
- believes they can help themselves

Copers tend to get better faster and stay better for longer.

## WHEN SHOULD YOU SEEK HELP?

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These are very rare symptoms. Contact a doctor if you have any of these:

- ✘ Recent difficulty passing or controlling urine.
- ✘ A change in sensation around your back passage or genitals.
- ✘ Numbness, pins and needles, or weakness in both legs.
- ✘ Recent unsteadiness on your feet.
- ✘ Severe pain that gets worse over several weeks.

You are feeling unwell with your back pain.

If your pain continues to be a problem, discuss this with your health professional as there are further treatment options available.

## KEY POINTS

### TO REMEMBER

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- ✓ The back is strong and designed to move.
- ✓ Serious or permanent damage is rare.
- ✓ Hurt does not mean harm or damage.
- ✓ Most back pain settles with time.
- ✓ There are lots of things you can do to help.
- ✓ Maintaining and gradually increasing your daily activity and fitness can help you recover sooner.

# NOTES

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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