

Managing low back pain: Treatment options



Back pain can be incredibly debilitating, causing severe pain and making even simple tasks such as getting out of bed or sitting down a challenge. Most back pain improves within a few weeks but there are plenty of things you can do to reduce the pain and speed up your recovery.

Self-help – managing your back pain^{1,2}

If you're suffering with back pain, you might feel like heading back to bed for the day. But, while this used to be common medical advice for this condition, the NHS and back pain charity BackCare have the following tips if your back is painful.

Keep moving

Stay active and try to continue with your daily activities. Gentle walking, swimming or even yoga and pilates can help to prevent stiffness. If you do have to sit, don't forget to take regular breaks to change position, stretch or walk around.

Ice and heat

Use an ice pack – which could even be a simple bag of frozen peas – wrapped in a tea towel to reduce pain and swelling. If you're suffering with joint stiffness or muscle spasms, a heat pack – or hot water bottle – can help to relieve these. Try both to determine what works best for you.

Pain medicine

Take anti-inflammatory medicine such as ibuprofen for back pain. Paracetamol on its own is not recommended by the NHS for back pain, but it may be used alongside another painkiller. Always follow the instructions that come with any medicine. If the pain is persistent, speak to your GP as they may need to prescribe stronger painkillers or investigate further.

Exercise and stretch

Exercises and stretches specifically for back pain can help to speed up your recovery. Videos are available from the NHS ([Back pain - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk)), the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy ([Video exercises for back pain | The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy \(csp.org.uk\)](https://www.csp.org.uk)) and BackCare ([Exercises for Back Pain - BackCare](https://www.backcare.co.uk)).

When to see a doctor¹

Most back pain will improve within a couple of weeks if you follow these tips but the NHS recommends contacting your GP in the following instances:

- If the pain hasn't improved;
- If the pain stops you doing your day-to-day activities;
- If the pain is severe or getting worse over time;
- If you're worried about the pain or struggling to cope.

It recommends contacting NHS 111 – or asking for an urgent GP appointment – if you have any of the following symptoms alongside the back pain:

- A high temperature
- Unexplained weight loss
- A lump or swelling in your back or your back has changed shape
- No improvement in the pain after resting or it gets worse at night
- The pain gets worse when sneezing, coughing or having a bowel movement
- The pain comes from between your shoulders rather than your lower back

Where the back pain is accompanied by the following symptoms, the NHS advice is to call 999 or go to A&E:

- Pain, tingling, weakness or numbness in both legs
- Numbness or tingling around your genitals or buttocks
- Difficulty peeing
- Loss of bladder or bowel control
- Chest pain
- The pain started after a serious accident such as a car accident

Treatments for back pain

A variety of back pain treatment options are available depending on the nature of the pain and your own preferences. Some, such as acupuncture, are based on ancient healing techniques, while others including physiotherapy and chiropractic care, are based on more modern approaches to rehabilitation and pain management.

Physiotherapy

- Physiotherapy helps to restore movement and function when someone is affected by injury, illness or disability. Using a combination of tailored exercises, manual therapy and advice, a physiotherapist can help to relieve pain and stiffness and strengthen the back muscles.

Manual therapy

- A therapist can use manual manipulation or “manual therapy” to massage and move the muscles, bones and joints in your back. This can help to decrease back pain caused by muscle spasm, muscle tension, and joint dysfunction.

Therapeutic massage

- Mobilization uses slower (versus manipulation), measured movements to twist, pull, or push your bones and joints into position to help restore flexibility and range of motion.³

Therapeutic massage

- Massage therapy improves blood flow, releases tense muscles and decreases overall stiffness in your soft tissues.

Acupuncture

- Acupuncture is a traditional Chinese medicine technique that uses very fine metal needles inserted into the body at specific points to stimulate the body's natural healing.

Cognitive behavioural therapy

- Cognitive behavioural therapy – or CBT – can be used to help someone with the pain they're experiencing.

Do I need surgery?

Surgery is rarely necessary for back pain, with most cases of back pain improving within a few weeks. However, where it is caused by a medical condition, such as a slipped disc, and other treatments have not helped, it may be necessary to consider surgery.

1. [Back pain - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk)