

# PHC

## Back Pain



Back pain is a very common problem that affects most people at some point in their life and in many cases difficult to prevent completely.

It may be triggered by bad posture while sitting or standing, bending awkwardly, or lifting incorrectly. It's not generally caused by a serious condition. Good back care is essential in preventing back pain and the negative consequences of back pain.

In most cases back pain will improve in a few weeks or months, although some people experience long-term pain or pain that keeps coming back.

### **What to do if you have back pain:**

Most cases of back pain get better on their own and you may not need to see a doctor.

If you've only had back pain for a few days or weeks, the following advice may help relieve your symptoms and speed up your recovery:

- remain as active as possible and try to continue with your daily activities
- take over-the-counter painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen if you feel you need to
- use hot or cold compression packs – you can buy these from your local pharmacy, or a bag of frozen vegetables and a hot water bottle will work just as well

Although it can be difficult to be cheerful or optimistic if you are in pain, it's important to stay positive as this can help you recover faster.

If you're worried about your back or your pain hasn't improved by around six weeks, it's a good idea to visit your GP, who can advise you about the treatments available.



### **Preventing back pain:**

Keeping your back strong and supple is the best way to avoid getting back pain. Regular exercise, maintaining good posture and lifting correctly will all help.

If you have recurring back pain, the following advice may be useful:

- lose weight – too much upper body weight can strain the lower back; you can use the healthy weight calculator to find out whether you need to lose weight
- wear flat shoes with cushioned soles as they can help reduce the pressure on your back
- avoid sudden movements which can cause muscle strain
- try to reduce any stress, anxiety and tension, which can all cause or worsen back pain
- stay active – regular exercise, such as walking and swimming, is an excellent way of preventing back pain



### **Exercise:**

- Exercise is both an excellent way of preventing back pain and of reducing it, but should seek medical advice before starting an exercise programme if you've had back pain for six weeks or more.
- Exercises such as walking or swimming strengthen the muscles that support your back without putting any strain on it or subjecting it to a sudden jolt.
- Activities such as yoga or Pilates can improve the flexibility and the strength of your back muscles. It's important that you carry out these activities under the guidance of a properly qualified instructor.

### **Posture:**

How you sit, stand and lie down can have an important effect on your back. The following tips should help you maintain a good posture:

- Standing - stand upright, with your head facing forward and your back straight. Balance your weight evenly on both feet and keep your legs straight.
- Sitting - Make sure you sit upright with support in the small of your back. Your knees and hips should be level and your feet should be flat on the floor (use a footstool if necessary). Some people find it useful to use a small cushion or rolled-up towel to support the small of the back.
- If you use a keyboard, make sure that your forearms are horizontal and your elbows are at right angles.

### **Driving:**

- Make sure that your lower back is properly supported. Correctly positioning your wing mirrors will prevent you from having to twist around. Your foot controls should be squarely in front of your feet.
- If you are driving long distances, take regular breaks so you can stretch your legs.

### **Sleeping:**

- Your mattress should be firm enough to support your body while supporting the weight of your shoulders and buttocks, keeping your spine straight.
- If your mattress is too soft, place a firm board (ideally 2cm thick) on top of the base of your bed and under the mattress. Your head should be supported with a pillow, but make sure your neck is not forced up at a steep angle.



### **Lifting and carrying:**

One of the biggest causes of back injury, particularly at work, is lifting or handling objects incorrectly. Learning and following the correct method for lifting and handling objects can help prevent back pain. You should:

- Think before you lift – can you manage the lift? Are there any handling aids you can use? Where is the load going?
- Start in a good position – your feet should be apart, with one leg slightly forward to maintain balance; when lifting, let your legs take the strain – bend your back, knees and hips slightly, but do not stoop or squat; tighten your stomach muscles to pull your pelvis in; do not straighten your legs before lifting as you may strain your back on the way up.

- Keep the load close to your waist – keep the load close to your body for as long as possible with the heaviest end nearest to you.
- Avoid twisting your back or leaning sideways, particularly when your back is bent – your shoulders should be level and facing in the same direction as your hips; turning by moving your feet is better than lifting and twisting at the same time.
- Keep your head up –once you have the load secure, look ahead, not down at the load.
- Know your limits – there is a big difference between what you can lift and what you can safely lift; if in doubt, get help.
- Push rather than pull – if you have to move a heavy object across the floor, it is better to push it rather than pull it.
- Distribute the weight evenly – if you are carrying shopping bags or luggage, try to distribute the weight evenly on both sides of your body.
- If your child needs to carry a bag to school, they should use a well-designed backpack that is worn over both shoulders. Avoid putting anything unnecessary in their bag to keep the weight to a minimum.

See the free NHS England back pain guide at <http://www.nhs.uk/Tools/Pages/Back-pain-guide.aspx> for advice about how to sit, stand and lift correctly to avoid backache, or read more about preventing back pain here <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Back-pain/Pages/Prevention.aspx>

**For more information:**

<http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org/>

<http://www.backcare.org.uk/>

<http://www.csp.org.uk/your-health/conditions/back-pain>

<http://www.paintoolkit.org/>