

# Advice for managing low back pain

A significant episode of back pain is something that 70 to 80% of people suffer from at some stage during their life. Back pain is very common but is rarely a sign of serious disease. It can be helped by many things that you can do for yourself. The aim of this advice is to support you to take control, remain active and recover well.

## Five things we know about back pain

### 1. It does not usually mean there is serious damage or disease

Back pain most often comes from a simple injury to back structures and is usually not due to something serious.

### 2. It gets better quickly

Back pain usually settles down by itself. 50% of people will be better within two weeks and 90% by 8 weeks.

### 3. But it often returns

It's not unusual to get repeat attacks of back pain, but this does not mean that your back is deteriorating. Often these are due to a change in your activity or lifestyle.

### 4. Rest rarely helps

Bed rest can be helpful for sudden back pain but only for a very short time (not more than 1–2 days). Once the pain has been there for a while, resting in bed actually prolongs the pain.

### 5. Staying active helps

Your back is designed to move - the sooner you get it moving the better you will feel! Staying gently active will help your back to recover. Even if movement causes some extra pain you will not be harming your back.



## What you can do to help your back pain

### Stay active – don't rest for too long

Prolonged rest lengthens recovery time and prolongs pain. The best advice is to keep gently active, even if it causes some extra pain.

**Taking pain relief regularly is often important to help you to keep moving.** Talk to your doctor about what medication is best. Other options for pain relief could include heat packs, relaxed breathing and distraction, such as listening to music.

### Keep doing your everyday activities and remain at work

Back pain need not stop you from doing what you want to do in your daily life. You can do most things as long as you think about the way you do them.

Be aware of the activities that make the pain worse and avoid things like excessive lifting and staying in one position for too long. Doing activities in small amounts with rest breaks will avoid flaring up your symptoms.

### Exercise

Gentle exercises, stretches and walking may help to ease your pain. Begin to exercise regularly, for short periods of time and gradually increase the amount you do as it feels more comfortable.



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## Is a scan necessary?

In most cases of back pain routine x-rays or scans are not necessary as they do not show the cause of pain. They expose you to radiation and do not change how your pain is managed. Scans often reveal wear changes that may not be all relevant to your current pain. This can add confusion and worry and slow down recovery.

## When to seek medical advice

Occasionally, back pain can be the result of a serious problem. It is important to seek medical advice immediately if you have any of these symptoms:

- > difficulty passing or controlling urine
- > poor control of your bowels
- > numbness around your back passage or genitals
- > numbness, pins and needles or weakness in both legs
- > unsteadiness when walking
- > unexplained loss of weight
- > night sweats, chills, fevers, nausea/ vomiting or unrelenting night pain.

## Acknowledgements:

*The Back Book*, Royal College of General Practitioners, NHS Executive

Australian Acute Musculoskeletal Pain Guidelines Group, : Evidence Based Management of Acute Musculoskeletal Pain

Sheffield Back Pain web site:  
<http://www.sheffieldbackpain.com>

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## For more information

Web: [www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/lowbackpain](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/lowbackpain)

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