

Back pain

This sheet has been written for people with back pain. It provides general information about back pain and what can be done to help it. It also tells you where to find further information. This sheet is not meant for people with back pain from osteoporosis.

What is back pain?

Back pain is pain that is felt in the lower part of the spine. It is a sign that the joints, muscles or other parts of the back are injured, strained or not working properly. Back pain is very common with four out of five people experiencing it at some time in their lives. Most bouts of back pain get better in several weeks with little treatment.

What are the symptoms?

Back pain can be felt in the back, as a sharp pain, ache or spasm. It can be felt in the middle of the back or on either side. Your back may feel stiff, making it difficult to turn or bend in certain directions. Sometimes pain can be felt in one or both of the legs, too. This can be a symptom of sciatica, a condition affecting the sciatic nerve. This nerve runs from the spine all the way down the leg.

What causes it?

There are many joints, muscles and other structures in the back that can cause pain. In most cases it is not even possible to find a cause of the pain. It can be worrying not knowing exactly what is wrong. The good news is that research shows you do not need to know the exact cause of the pain to be able to deal with it successfully. It is rare for back pain to be caused by a serious medical problem.

Should I see a doctor?

You should talk to your doctor or other health professional if your pain is bothering you. They will ask you about your symptoms and examine you. In most cases tests such as x-rays and blood tests are not helpful in finding out the cause of back pain unless there has been an obvious injury or strain. They may check for any serious medical problems that could be causing your pain, but these are rare. You should see your doctor if:

- your pain does not settle down after a few weeks, or starts getting worse
- you have symptoms such as losing weight, tingling or numbness in the legs or feet, sweats and chills, problems controlling your bladder or bowel
- you have osteoporosis and you start getting back pain.

What will happen to me?

For most people back pain settles down fairly quickly. This usually takes several weeks but can be different for different people. After two months, nine out of 10 people will have recovered from back pain. About half of the people who get back pain will have it again within a couple of years. Between attacks most people return to normal activities with very few symptoms. It is important to learn ways to prevent another bout of back pain. See your doctor or physiotherapist for advice.

What can I do?

1. **Talk to your healthcare team.** It is normal to worry about the cause of your pain and how it will affect you. Talking to your doctor or other health professional about your worries can be helpful. You will usually find there is no serious cause and there are ways you can deal with it.
2. **Learn about back pain and play an active role in your treatment.** Not all information you read or hear about is trustworthy so always talk to your doctor or healthcare team about treatments you are thinking about trying. Reliable sources of further information are also listed in the section below. Self management courses aim to help you develop skills to be actively involved in your healthcare. Contact your local Arthritis Office for details of these courses.

3. Learn ways to manage pain. Talk to your healthcare team about ways to relieve your pain. There are many things you can try, including:

- acupuncture: this has been shown to be helpful with longer-term back pain
- massage: may be useful for short and long-term back pain, especially when combined with exercises and education
- manipulation of the spine: this may be useful for some cases of longer-term back pain although further research is necessary to better understand the benefits
- medicines: there are medicines that can help with back pain. See the *Medicines and arthritis* information sheet.

4. Stay active. Your back is designed for movement. The sooner you get back to your normal activities the sooner you will recover from a bout of back pain. You may need to rest or reduce some activities when the pain is bad. But resting for more than a day or two usually does not help and may do more harm than good. See a physiotherapist or other health professional for advice about exercises to keep your back moving. See the *Working with your healthcare team* information sheet for more information about seeing a physiotherapist.

5. Acknowledge your feelings and seek support. It is natural to feel scared, frustrated, sad and sometimes angry when you have pain. Be aware of these feelings

and get help if they start affecting your daily life. See the *Arthritis and emotions* information sheet.

There are many other treatments for back pain that have not been well proven. Some unproven treatments may still be useful, however further research is needed. These treatments include:

- herbal medicines: Cayenne, devil's claw, white willow bark and comfrey may help to relieve pain more than fake treatments but have only been tested in short-term (6 week studies). It is unclear whether any of these, or other, herbal medicines are safe and useful for long term use. Always talk to your doctor or pharmacist about your medicines, as even natural and over-the-counter medicines can have side effects. See the *Complementary therapies* sheet.
- low level laser therapy
- ultrasound therapy
- heat and cold (eg. hot water bottles, heat packs, ice packs).

Traction and TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) do not seem to be useful for back pain. Your healthcare team can give you more advice and information about whether any of these or other treatments might be useful for you.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.

Back pain is common but is rarely due to serious disease. Staying active will help you get better faster and prevent more problems.

For more information:

Websites: Arthritis Research UK www.arthritisresearchuk.org
American College of Rheumatology www.rheumatology.org
The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has an information sheet on acute back pain available at www.nhmrc.gov.au
To find a physiotherapist, ask your doctor, contact the Australian Physiotherapy Association on 1300 306 622 or use the 'find a physio' feature at www.physiotherapy.asn.au

Arthritis Australia's *Back pain* booklet provides information to help you understand back pain, work with your healthcare team and choose treatments that are appropriate for you. The booklet is available at www.arthritisaustralia.com.au or by calling 1800 011 041.

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Your local Arthritis Office has information, education and support for people with arthritis
Helpline 1800 011 041 www.arthritisaustralia.com.au

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