



## Dealing with Back Pain



A guide to help you regain a healthy back

## Introduction

If you have Back Pain you are not alone. It is estimated that 60 to 80% of people in the UK are affected during their lives. It is one of the most common reasons for taking time off work. HRM Case Managers work to the latest research-based guidelines to ensure your problem is dealt with in the most appropriate way, in order to provide the best outcome for you, your family and your employer. This document provides the most up to date guidance to assist you with managing your back pain and shows some simple exercises you can do to help you recover.

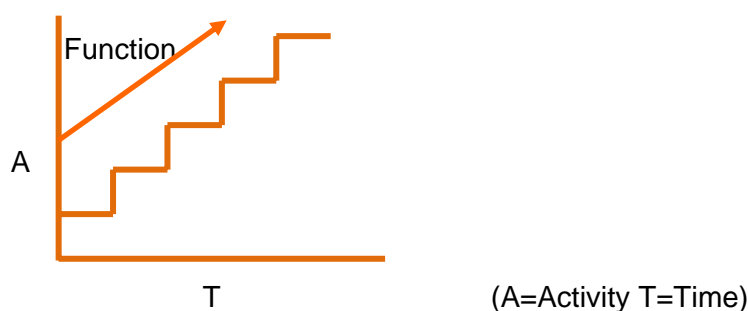
It is recognized that back problems can be split into three categories, all of which require different management. These three categories are non specific back pain, sciatica and serious disease

## Non Specific Back Pain

Normally, the bones, ligaments and muscles of the back work together very efficiently. However in non-specific back pain something goes temporarily wrong.

Pain can come on suddenly but can also be due to strain over time rather than the result of overdoing it just once. It is very rare for the back to become permanently damaged and in most cases of non-specific low back pain we know that people are always going to get better, but they will be limited in their activities for a short period of time.

Initially your back will limit your function. However, by increasing your activity, in a step by step manner, you should notice that your back pain and overall function will improve over time, as the diagram shows.



**Graded activity = small steps**

It's worth bearing in mind that the back is a strong and robust part of the body designed to perform physical work. Being physically active, in itself, is generally good for the back. Indeed, exercise is helpful in speeding recovery from simple back pain. The exercises detailed throughout this document can be helpful in improving mobility in your back.



## Exercise one

In standing

Bend sideways at the waist, and run your fingers down the side of your leg. Repeat to the other side.

Repeat 10 times

Most people who suffer from non specific back pain are adults up to 55 years old who are otherwise healthy. The pain is often based in the lumbar region (lower back), and may also spread to the buttocks and thighs. It may come and go at different times, depending on different levels of activity. Simple back pain triggers can include:

- Prolonged sustained sitting postures
- Lack of exercise
- Sudden burst of strenuous activity without being fit enough
- Standing or bending down for longer periods than normal
- Lifting, carrying, pushing or pulling loads that are simply too heavy, or going about these tasks in the wrong way
- A trip or fall

## Sciatica

A small number of people can suffer from sciatica. Sciatica is caused by irritation of a nerve root in the back. It is usually caused when a vertebral disc becomes displaced or bulges out from its normal position, putting pressure on the nerve root. This is often referred to as a slipped disc.

The pain will normally be in the leg as well as the lower back, and there may be pain down one or both legs to the calves, feet or toes. The pain is called sciatica because the nerve that runs down each leg is called the sciatic nerve.

This condition can also be corrected by appropriate exercises and can often resolve with time. On some occasions, if symptoms are not settling after a prolonged period of time the use of injections can be helpful. Surgery is not usually the first treatment option, although it can be helpful if symptoms fail to settle, or if there are certain specific clinical signs.

## More Serious Problems

In a relatively small number of cases, back pain may have a more serious underlying cause. HRM will rule out serious conditions before referring you for appropriate treatment using a telephone questionnaire in the first instance. You may also be referred to a Specialist if back pain starts gradually, gets worse over time, and seems unrelated to the level of activity. Remember that this is a relatively rare occurrence, and the level of pain you are experiencing is not always directly related to a serious problem.

## When to see a Doctor

Most attacks of non specific back pain last from a few days to a few weeks and get better without medical intervention. But anyone with the following symptoms in addition to back pain should see a doctor as soon as possible:

- Fever
- Redness or swelling on the back
- Pain down both legs and below the knees
- Numbness or weakness in one or both legs
- Loss of bladder or bowel control
- Weight loss

A doctor should also be consulted if:

- Pain lasts longer than a few weeks without showing any improvement, despite following guidelines to take pain killers and/or anti-inflammatories, plus gradually increasing activity
- Pain is the result of an injury such as a fall or a blow to the back
- You feel generally unwell associated with your back pain

## MRI Scans and X-Rays

In most cases, the doctor or musculoskeletal therapist will only need to discuss your symptoms and possibly carry out an examination, though this is not always necessary. More tests might be suggested only if the pain lasts longer than six weeks and sciatica is suspected, or if there are indications of some underlying condition that might be causing the pain. Carrying out tests on most episodes of non-specific back pain is not necessary, but they may be used on the small number of people who experience sciatica or other serious problems.

If tests are carried out they may include:

- X-rays
- CT (computerised tomography) scans
- MRI (magnetic resonance imaging)
- Blood tests

It is important to know that MRI scans are extremely sensitive, and often show 'wear and tear' changes that are not linked to your pain problem. Sometimes, this can be misleading, and there is a risk of over-treatment. This will be discussed with you by your musculoskeletal specialist, via the case management process.



### Exercise Two

Lying on your back with knees together and bent

Slowly roll your knees from side to side keeping your upper body still

Repeat 10 times to either side

## Treatment for Non Specific Back Pain and Sciatica

### It is Important to STAY ACTIVE

Research shows that bed rest does not help – it's much better to return to normal physical activity as soon as possible. Staying active may hurt more at first, but it helps the back to heal quickly, and reduces the risk of the problem occurring again.

If the pain is so bad in the first few days that resting is really the only option, keep bed rest as short as possible before getting up and about again.

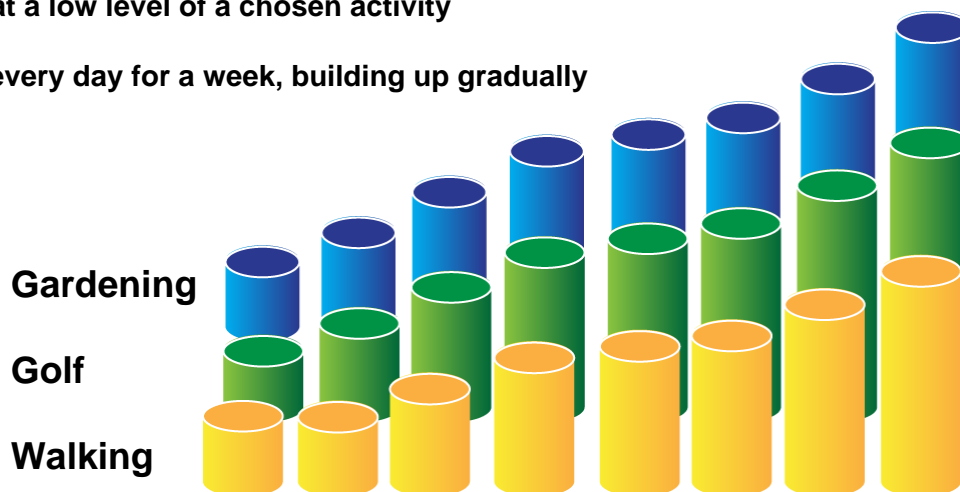
Try not to let others do everything for you, as this will only prolong your suffering. Remember that activity is the best remedy, and the easiest way to start is to follow your normal daily routines as much as possible, building up in small steps.

Set yourself small functional goals, so you can build up in a step by step manner, as the diagram shows.

### What does your pain stop you doing that you would like to be able to do?

#### Start at a low level of a chosen activity

#### Do it every day for a week, building up gradually



### Relieve the Pain

Paracetamol is best for relieving most episodes. You can try an anti-inflammatory such as Ibuprofen if you can tolerate it, but you should check the information accompanying the tablets first or ask your doctor. Prescribed muscle relaxants such as diazepam may help with muscle spasms, but they generally shouldn't be taken for more than a week. A hot water bottle or heat pad applied to the painful area may offer some relief. You could try ice packs as well.

## Manipulation and Exercise

Exercises and manipulation can be helpful if the pain lasts longer. Consult a physiotherapist registered with the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy. If you have been referred to HRM, you will be assigned to the most appropriate therapist. You should be prepared to do most of the work – you probably do not need passive therapy, i.e. to have someone else doing something to you; rather you should be advised what to do and help yourself by putting the advice into practice.

Osteopathy and chiropractic are treatments involving manipulation of the spine. They may provide short-term relief within the first six weeks. Consult an osteopath registered with the General Osteopathic Council or a chiropractor registered with the British Chiropractic Association. If you prefer one of these therapies, the advice, to remain active in between appointments and to expect to recover, remains the same.

Try Pilates lessons - Pilates is a type of exercise that is very effective in overcoming and preventing back pain as it strengthens and stabilises the deep core muscles which support the back and pelvis.

Some forms of yoga can also be helpful, involving stretching and strengthening, with the additional benefit of mind calming effects. This can be very useful if you find yourself getting anxious due to the pain. If you want to try yoga, try a basic class first rather than approaches such as Astanga or power yoga.

## Complementary Approaches

It is now well known that being distressed or unhappy can cause aches and pains even though we may not even be aware of our feelings. It is impossible to completely divorce our minds from our bodies, and the latest approach to pain is all about recognising the link between the two.

Because back pain can sometimes be caused by or made worse by how we feel, treatment sometimes needs to focus on this area also. This may involve identifying and addressing psychological issues which may be preventing improvement; it is recognised if these are ignored it is often more difficult to recover from an episode of back pain.

The Alexander Technique may help improve posture and make sufficient adjustments to prevent any future occurrences of back pain.

Some people find that acupuncture helps with the pain; although there is no definite scientific explanation of how it works, there is some clinical evidence of its effectiveness, especially when pain has become chronic. It is not thought to be significantly helpful in acute pain.



### Exercise Three

Stand straight with feet apart

Support your back with your hands whilst leaning your back backwards. Keep your knees straight during the exercise.

Repeat 10 times

## Rehabilitation Programmes

HRM runs an innovative evidence-based service called FROG (Functional Rehabilitation for Optimal Gain) which can aid recovery from an episode of back pain, where recovery has taken longer than normal. These programmes combine education and exercise, using a cognitive-behavioural approach, to help you regain your normal function.

## Musculoskeletal Case Management

If you have been referred by your employer to the musculoskeletal helpline or via the case management service, you will be contacted by telephone. The aim of the service will be to ensure you have prompt access to the most clinically appropriate and up to date advice and support.

Your condition may be assessed by discussion with an expert specialist physiotherapist, over the telephone, using a clinical questionnaire. From this, the physiotherapist can decide whether you will need further telephone support or a face to face session with a physiotherapist. In both cases you will be given appropriate advice and possibly some personalised exercises to help you overcome your back problem. You will rarely need more than 3 face to face sessions, but if there is no improvement after 4 to 6 sessions, you may need to be referred to a musculoskeletal physician or surgeon for further investigation. A small number of cases may need to see a musculoskeletal physician or surgeon first.

## Addressing Psychosocial Factors

This is not as frightening as it sounds – it simply means that, as is well known through extensive research, people are not simply a collection of muscles and bones, but have complicated interactions between their emotions and personal circumstances, and the way they feel and respond on any given day. Sometimes, these factors can make pain and disability seem unbearable. We aim to help address all aspects of you and your pain, as a whole person and not in isolation. Sometimes this will mean that you will receive advice which focuses on both physical and psychological factors. This can be very important in helping you regain control of your life, and preventing the long term misery of developing a chronic condition.

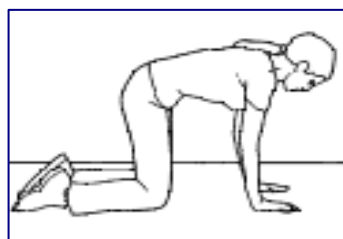


### Exercise Four

On all fours

Keep your hands still and sit back onto your heels, ensuring you stretch your mid and lower back. Hold position for 5 seconds

Repeat 10 times



### Exercise Five

On all fours

Let your lower stomach muscles relax, then gently draw them upwards and inwards, holding this position for 10 seconds.

Repeat 5 times

## Work

Work is generally good for you – as soon as possible you should return to work, although you may need some temporary adjustments to your work in order to make this possible. This will be discussed with you by your Line Manager with advice from your HRM Case Manager when the time comes. Don't worry; you will be given good advice and support for gradually restoring your work activities to their normal level, using some of the principles described earlier.

## Surgery

If chronic back pain isn't helped by manipulation, exercises or medication, then surgery may help the problem. If sciatic pain is caused by a bulging disc, for instance, and this is not improving over a prolonged period of time, this could be surgically removed. HRM can help with accessing surgery as well as planning your return to work afterwards.

## Preventing Back Pain

Good back care habits can greatly reduce the risk of back pain. To look after your back, make sure you:

- Take regular exercise
- Watch your weight
- Stop smoking
- Stay positive
- Build core abdominal strength
- Maintain good posture
- Find an activity you enjoy which increases your pulse rate and requires flexibility – and keep doing it!

And finally:

Sometimes when you see a medical professional you will be told “there is nothing else I can do for you”. To most people, this means they are beyond help and are therefore doomed to a lifetime of pain and dysfunction. In fact, we would suggest that the opposite is true – this statement usually means that you do not have a serious condition, and should look at the management of your fitness and activity levels, in order to take control of your pain and its sometimes devastating effects. Even when major surgery has been the only option, people can recover equally well, and resume their normal lives, by following the principles outlined above. Start slowly and build up, have patience, and trust that there is nothing you do which will make matters worse – doing nothing is your biggest risk!!!



### Exercise Six

Lying on your back with knees bent.

Flatten your spine into the floor. Gentle pull in your lower stomach muscles, holding for 10 seconds.

Ensure you breathe normally whilst doing this exercise.

Repeat 5 times