

Low back pain

Your physiotherapist has diagnosed you with low back pain. This booklet provides information on the common causes and how physiotherapy can help. If you have any questions, please speak to your physiotherapist

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Information on low back pain

Low back pain is extremely common. More than 80 out of 100 people will experience it at some point in their life. Low back pain is a major cause of worry, disability and time off work. Even though it can be extremely painful it is rarely associated with serious disease.

Mostly, symptoms settle quickly. However, it is common to get recurring episodes of pain. In a few people, pain may persist longer than a few weeks

Types of low back pain

There are three broad types.

- Non-specific low back pain
- Sciatica (nerve root pain)
- Serious spinal pathology (red flags)

Non-specific low back pain

This is the most common type of back pain (95 people in 100). It is not possible to diagnose the exact cause of in the majority of people suffering from back pain. This is why the term non-specific low back pain is used.

Sciatica (nerve root pain)

A small number of people (five people in 100) will develop sciatica. Sciatica is caused by physical and/or chemical irritation of one of the nerve roots in the lower back. It can cause leg pain with or without numbness and/or pins and needles in the leg. Please speak to your physiotherapist to find out more information on sciatica.

Serious spinal pathology (red flags)

In rare circumstances (less than one person in 100), back pain can cause symptoms (also known as 'red flags') that require urgent medical attention. If you have any of these signs or symptoms it is important that you alert your GP or another medical professional immediately:

- Inability to pass urine
- Numbness around the genital region or back passage
- Loss of feeling, pins and needles or numbness in both legs
- History of cancer
- Significant unexplained weight loss
- A fever / feeling unwell
- History of trauma

Your physiotherapist will ask specific questions and perform a physical examination to see if there is a more serious cause for back pain.

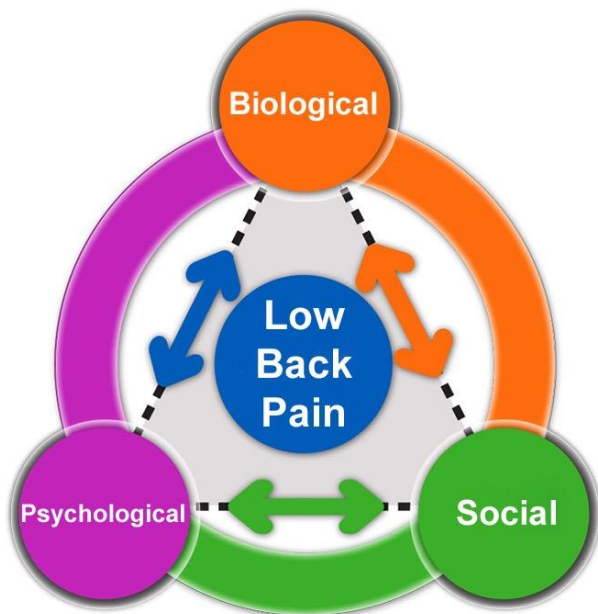
What causes non-specific low back pain?

There is no one cause but there are a range of recognised contributory factors. These factors will be unique to you and your situation.

Contributory factors

It is important to consider all pain in a '**biopsychosocial framework**'. This means there will be biological, psychological and social factors that can influence each other, and the level of pain.

A biopsychosocial framework of pain



Cardiovascular fitness (healthy heart)

Poor cardiovascular fitness and low levels of physical activity are closely associated with low back pain. Regular physical activity and improved cardiovascular fitness are important for general health and helps you to carry out daily tasks and leisure activities.



Emotional wellbeing (mood, anxiety, stress)

When living with pain it is normal to notice changes in your mood. Research has shown that they are closely linked. It is common for people to report that it not only impacts on their ability to manage but may also influence pain itself.



Your pain is a real physical experience that can also be affected by anxiety and stress. For example, being worried, anxious or stressed can cause physical changes to your body like your heart beating faster and clammy palms. It can also increase the level of pain.

Attitude and beliefs

Your past experiences can influence your body's interpretation of pain and the way you respond to pain. Appreciating a current understanding of pain can help you make positive steps in your recovery.



Sleep quality

Sleep is an essential part of feeling well and happy. Poor sleep quality and sleep disruption can deprive you of needed rest and recuperation, which can make managing your pain more difficult.



Strength

Reduced muscle strength can make daily tasks challenging and contribute towards low back pain. It is important to improve the strength of muscles throughout the whole body. There is no one form of exercise that is proven to be better than another and the strength you need will depend on what you want to do.



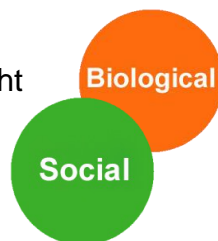
Comorbidities (other health problems)

There is a relationship between medical conditions (such as diabetes, hypertension, respiratory and cardiovascular disease) and low back pain. Improving the management of your overall health can have a positive impact on your back pain.



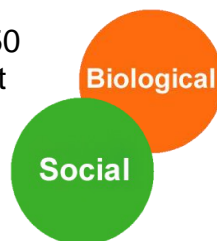
Weight

There is an association between being overweight and low back pain. Excess weight can increase the physical demand on the body and contribute towards low grade inflammation.



Smoking

Smoking increases the risk of developing over 50 serious health conditions including cancer, heart disease and stroke. Research has also identified smoking has an association with low back pain.



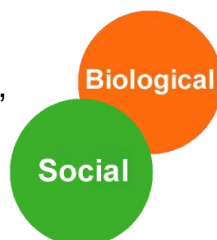
Flexibility and stiffness

Everyone is built differently and there is no ideal amount of flexibility. Being able to tolerate what you want to do in life may require more mobility and flexibility.



Posture

There is no perfect posture. Having a particular posture does not cause low back pain. However, consistently being in the same position without regularly changing position can contribute towards your pain.



What is the prognosis of non-specific low back pain?

The vast majority of people will recover from an episode of low back pain in six to eight weeks. However, it can be common to experience recurring episodes, with a third of people experiencing another episode within 12 months. For some, low back pain can also be a long-lasting condition. Having some of the contributory factors identified above may put you at greater risk of developing persistent pain.

How is it managed?

Resting and avoiding any painful activities for more than a day or two may actually prolong pain. Keeping as active as possible can help you recover and get back to the things important to you. An important message is 'hurt does not equal harm'.

Painkillers and anti-inflammatory medication can help you to get back to your usual activities.

If pain persists beyond six to eight weeks, it can be helpful to discuss your pain with someone who specialises in managing low back pain (such as a physiotherapist).

How will physiotherapy help?

Physiotherapy may form one part of your management strategy. Physiotherapy will help identify the main contributory factors and help plan your rehabilitation.

It is normal for a physiotherapist to spend time talking with you and learning about your personal experience of back pain. Alongside a detailed physical examination, this helps direct treatment most appropriately to your needs and goals. Following this, physiotherapy may provide reassurance and advice, exercise guidance and help discuss any particular concerns you may have.

Exercise may form an important part of your recovery. Your physiotherapist may prescribe exercises to improve your fitness, confidence in movement, mobility and strength. These are all designed to support you getting back to what matters to you. Exercise can also reduce stress and tension, improve mood and sleep quality.

Pacing your exercise and activity

Sometimes people find their pain can increase when they start to exercise again or if they overdo things in one go. If this change leads to pain that is not tolerable, it can be helpful to pace your activity. Recognise how much you've managed to do recently and use this as a starting place. Try to breakdown tasks in to manageable chunks, given yourself a rest period between activity. Try to then gradually build activity up overtime.

Work

Staying at work and/or returning to work quickly has been shown to positively influence recovery.

If your work involves activities that you feel aggravate your pain it is important that you let your work manager

(or your occupational health department if you have one) know that you may need some help to continue with your normal duties. It may be possible to modify your work activities in the short term to enable you returning to work sooner.

Relaxation

We already discussed the many contributory factors to low back pain. Quite often stress, anxiety and low mood can occur along with your back pain. These mood states can also heighten your experience of pain.

Many people find that simple relaxation techniques are an effective tool in managing pain and stress that is related to low back pain.

Like anything else, relaxation works better the more you do it, so if you find it helpful, aim to put aside some time each day to practice. Of course if you find something else works better for you, whether it's reading or singing or lying in a hot bath, do that instead!

If you find your back pain is affecting your mental health as well as your physical health, talk to your physiotherapist or GP about what additional help you can get.

South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust provide easy access to talking therapy in Croydon, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark and you can refer yourself: www.slam-iapt.nhs.uk/self-referral/

Do I require an X-ray or MRI scan?

X-rays are not required in the assessment of low back pain (unless a fracture is suspected).

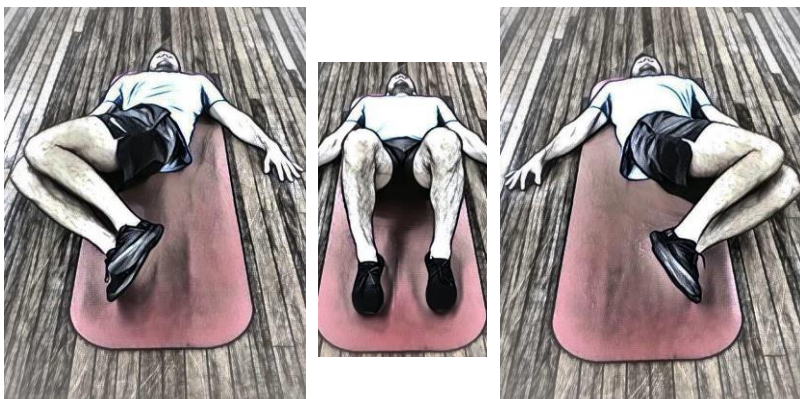
MRI scans give a very detailed picture of the spine and may form part of the assessment process, but they are not as important as detailed questions and a physical examination.

In the vast majority of patients with low back pain, MRI scans are unable to identify the cause of pain. MRI scans do not reflect the degree of pain that people experience. It is common to see age-related changes (to discs and joints) in people with back pain, as well as people without back pain. Therefore, in the vast majority of cases, MRI scans are not helpful as it rarely leads to a change in management or improved outcomes.

Exercise examples in pictures

Below are a few examples of exercises that can be used early on to help you get moving. If you require any further information about these exercises, please speak to your physiotherapist.

Knee rolls



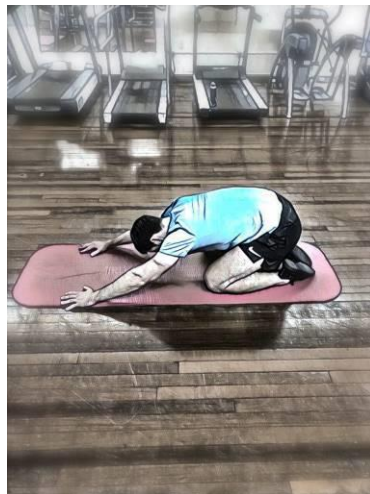
Knee hugs – one leg or two legs



Back extensions – on forearms or hands



Bottom to heels stretch



Squat



Information on getting and keeping active for free or reduced cost locally

There are local initiatives and schemes to help you get active in your local area.

Southwark

Free Gym and Swim for Southwark residents at Southwark leisure centres:

<http://www.southwark.gov.uk/leisure-and-sport/free-swim-and-gym>

Older adults free sport and physical activity:

<http://www.southwark.gov.uk/leisure-and-sport/local-sport-and-physical-activities?chapter=3>

Southwark Exercise referral scheme (via GP referral):

<https://www.southwark.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing/public-health/for-the-public/being-active?chapter=3>

Lambeth

LEIPS (Lambeth Early Intervention and Prevention Services) information – inclusive of Lambeth Exercise referral scheme (via GP referral):

<https://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/our-services/leips/patients.aspx#na>

Reduced Better Gym membership in Lambeth:

<https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/leisure-parks-and-libraries/sports-and-leisure/apply-for-a-real-plus-leisure-card>

Find your local Lambeth Leisure centre:

<https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/leisure-parks-and-libraries/map-of-leisure-centres>

Where can I get further information?

Versusarthritis (previously Arthritis Research UK)

<https://www.versusarthritis.org/about-arthritis/conditions/back-pain/>

Chartered society of physiotherapy (CSP) – 10 things to know about your back

<https://www.csp.org.uk/publications/10-things-you-need-know-about-your-back>

Chartered society of physiotherapy (CSP) – Back pain myth busters

<https://www.csp.org.uk/conditions/back-pain/back-pain-myth-busters>

National Institute of Clinical Excellence – Low back pain and sciatica in over 16s: assessment and management

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng59>

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns please contact the Physiotherapy Department, **t:** 020 7188 5094, Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 5pm

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints)

e: complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch.

t: 020 7188 8815 **e:** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 111 **w:** 111.nhs.uk

NHS website

Online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you take control of your health and wellbeing. **w:** www.nhs.uk

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