

# Persistent Back Pain

How to Manage Your Persistent Low Back Pain

## The information in this leaflet comes from:

- What patients have said they want to know about persistent low back pain
- The most up to date evidence on how to move forward. You have been given this leaflet because you have persistent low back pain.

## Back Pain is Very Common

- Up to 80% of people have back pain at some point in their life
- 1 year after the first episode 50% of people have ongoing symptoms.

Most people get back pain at some point in their lives. This does not mean it is serious. What you do about it can reduce the suffering that comes along with it.

## Surely Pain Means Injury?

In acute pain, pain is a signal of actual or possible damage. For example if you stub your toe you may have a high pain level at the start but it quickly settles. The pain is drawing your attention to your toe. Once you realise what it is you don't worry about it and the pain eases.

Chronic pain is pain that lasts longer than 3 months. Most soft tissue injuries heal within 3 months. In some cases the injury heals, but the pain continues. We cannot say why this happens in some people but not in others. The latest research shows that changes in the body's pain or 'alarm' system are important factors.

Serious damage is rare in back pain. Being positive and moving on are the best ways to improve in the long term.

**False:** Pain always means harm

**True:** Pain is part of the body's alarm system to alert you to an actual or potential problem. Sometimes the alarm system gets rewired and sends constant signals even when there is nothing serious wrong.

## What X Rays and Scans Tell Us

Your GP may refer you for x-rays or scans. Sometimes people who have intense pain have normal x-ray or scans. In other cases there may be a lot of changes on an x ray, but the person has little if any pain.

X-rays or scans do not show pain

Accepting the negative result of a test in a positive way is important. This should reassure you that you are okay and unlikely to have a serious problem. Sometimes people get told that they have 'wear and tear' or 'bulging discs'. This can sound worrying. In fact these 'abnormal' findings are actually 'normal' as we get older. By about 40 years of age 60% of people will have disc bulging. This means that many people have disc bulges, but do not have pain. Investigations don't always explain pain and this can be frustrating. Worrying about the cause of pain can be a barrier to moving forward. Most people who have back pain can learn to deal with the pain themselves.

## Activity or Bed Rest?

All the best research shows that staying active is one of the best things you can do for back pain. If you need to rest, no more than 1 or 2 days is advised.

### Disadvantages of resting too much or avoiding activity are:

- Muscles weaken
- You get stiffer
- You lose your fitness
- You are able to do things less
- Poor sleep
- You put on weight
- Feel fed up
- Feel frustrated
- Lose confidence
- Feel lethargic
- Lose concentration
- Become forgetful

Benefits of being active are:

- Strengthens muscles
- Strengthens heart and lungs
- Reduce blood pressure
- Lose weight
- Reduced stress
- Strengthens your immune system
- Makes your bones stronger
- Improves concentration
- Reduce pain
- Lifts mood

- People who stay active have a positive attitude and suffer less
- Doing a small amount each day is better than a large amount once or twice per week

- Build up gradually by pacing rather than jumping ahead. This means staying in control by pausing before the pain worsens and not fighting through the pain.

### **Worrying About Pain Can Make it Worse**

It is common for people to be anxious or worried about back pain. Current evidence shows that this can contribute to pain. Other factors which can make you worse are shown below:

- Thinking that you have a serious injury
- Believing that hurt equals harm
- Avoiding movement or activity due to fear of causing damage
- Prolonged rest or inactivity
- Waiting for someone else to 'fix' your pain rather than getting on with life
- Becoming withdrawn and depressed.

The above factors can start early and become deep rooted. Pain is a physical and emotional experience. The earlier you get information that helps you to understand your situation the better.

**Question:** Does this mean the pain is all in my head?

**Answer:** No. Pain affects every aspect of life, work, family, relationships and social life. The earlier you get access to good information and by thinking positively you can reduce the impact of pain on your life.

### **Medication**

Painkillers may not cure the pain but can allow you to cope better. People who have had pain for a long time emphasise how important it is to discuss their medication with their GP or Pharmacist. One of the most common beliefs is that you only take your tablets when you need them. This leads to poorly controlled pain or a 'yo-yo' effect. Tablets are more effective if taken regularly as prescribed.

## **Pain and Work**

Many people with chronic pain find it difficult to continue at work or do not see themselves returning to work. Sometimes the loss of social contact and structure to the day is as damaging as the financial loss. Despite the obstacles many people with chronic pain return to work.

Where possible try to stay at work this may mean a change to your duties.

A change of employment may be required your health professional or Job Centre Plus can advise on this.

### **If you are at work:**

- Discuss your difficulties with your employer
- Stress that you want to be at work. Offer suggestions to overcome your problems.

### **If you have just been signed off work:**

- Try to return as soon as possible.  
The longer you are off the less likely it is you will return.

### **If you are on benefits:**

- Your 'Personal Adviser' at Job Centre Plus can help you discuss and provide assistance on return to work issues

## **Summary**

Back pain is rarely due to anything serious.  
The above information is from the most up to date research and guidelines.

The important thing is how you get on with your life.  
How much your back pain affects you depends on what you do about it yourself.

Try to stay positive. There is a lot you can do to help yourself.  
Most symptoms do settle with time.

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