

Stay active

Don't take back pain lying down

Information sheet 1

If you have back pain, 'stay active' is the advice you will get from your doctor, physiotherapist, osteopath and the pharmacist. Most back pain is not caused by serious disease or damage and is called non-specific, simple low back pain. This sheet explains why you should stay active, what that means and how you can do it.

About 80% of us will get back pain in our lifetime, possibly from leisure, work or even normal activities. Most of us will get it more than once.

The people who cope best with back pain are those who stay active, get back to work quickly and get on with their normal activities, despite the pain. But, you should see your doctor if you are worried about the back pain or if the pain persists or suddenly gets worse.

Why stay active?

Staying active helps you manage your back pain and your life.

There's been a radical shift in thinking about treatment for back pain in the last decade. The old-fashioned treatment for back pain was to rest and wait for the pain to go away. We now know from studies around the world that:

- most spells of back pain will get better on their own;
- it's bad to stay in bed;
- the best treatment is to stay active;
- it's important to carry on with normal activities, including getting back to work, even if the pain hasn't completely gone;
- getting miserable about it just makes things worse.

This is the advice you'll hear from medical organisations, GPs, patient groups, occupational health professionals, chiropractors and osteopaths.



What does 'stay active' mean and how do I do it?

What you do in the early stages of back pain is very important. For some people, it can be very painful. However, rest for more than a day or two usually doesn't help and may prolong the pain and make things worse.

*Whatever your job,
look after your back*

Your back is designed for a lot of movement and the muscles will weaken if you don't use them.

The sooner you get moving, get back to work and get on with ordinary activities as normally as possible, the sooner you will start to feel better, even if the pain hasn't completely gone.

Try simple pain relief to manage the pain. It's better to take painkillers by the clock rather than waiting until the pain is really bad. Heat or cold may help.

Although aches and pains may last for some time, that doesn't mean it's serious. Getting stiff joints and muscles going again can be painful; athletes accept that when they start training, their muscles can hurt and they have to work through the pain. But that doesn't mean they are doing any damage.

Your body thrives on activity so, as far as possible, do what you normally do. Make sure you get active – walk, take the stairs instead of the lift, cycle, swim and keep up normal exercise.

Such regular physical activity will help you to recover, get back to work sooner and make it less likely that you'll suffer from back pain in the future. Be positive and get on with your life.

Want to know more?

For more information about tackling back pain and the Better Backs campaign, visit: betterbacks.hse.gov.uk or phone HSE's Infoline on: 0845 345 0055

These websites and documents will give you more help and advice:

The Back Book www.tsoshop.co.uk/bookstore.asp?FO=1160007&DI=346223

Back Care: www.backcare-helpline.org

For free practical advice on health, safety and return to work issues please contact Workplace Health Connect on: 0845 609 6006