

Staying active and returning to work

Advice for workers

6

Most back pain is not due to any serious damage or disease. This sheet explains when you need medical attention, what you can do to ease back pain, how to help yourself stay in work and what to do if you are away from work.

Dealing with a period of back pain

A period of back pain is very common. Sometimes, pain can last for quite a long time and cause a great deal of misery, but that doesn't mean it is serious (the box overleaf explains when you should seek medical attention immediately and not follow the advice given here).

If you have an attack of back pain, what you do in the early stages is important. Rest for more than a day or two does not usually help and may actually prolong the pain. **Your back is designed for movement and needs to be kept moving.** The sooner you get going and doing your ordinary activities as normally as possible, the sooner you will feel better.

Use simple methods to mask the pain. Over-the-counter painkillers such as paracetamol, taken at regular intervals, at the full recommended dose, are suitable. Heat or cold applied to the sore area may help. Manipulation, if done by a qualified professional osteopath or chiropractor, can help relieve back pain. You should begin to feel the benefit within a few sessions. It is not a good idea to have long-term manipulation treatment.

We are not suggesting that it will be easy to get your back moving when it is painful. Try to find activity that suits you and steadily increase your level of activity. Do a little bit more each day if the pain has been restricting your



movement. Do not stay in one position for too long. Get up and stretch regularly. Move about and take some walks, building up your activity as you get stronger.

It is important to stay at work if you can, as this helps you to keep active and recover from the pain. If you have a lot of lifting or other risk factors in your job, talk to your supervisor or

boss and tell them about tasks that will be difficult to begin with. Even if the pain is particularly severe and you are off work, you can still try to do most daily activities or hobbies. You may need to change your approach slightly. Don't do one thing for too long. Keep changing your activities so that you are changing position and moving around from time to time.

Seek medical attention if you have any of these warning signs

Back pain usually eases within days or a few weeks, at least enough to get on with your life. Only a few people with back pain have a slipped disc or a trapped nerve. Even then, it usually gets better by itself. X-rays and MRI scans can detect serious spinal injuries (which are very rare), but they don't usually help with a diagnosis in ordinary back pain.

If you find you have severe pain, which gets worse over several weeks instead of better, or if you are unwell with back pain, you should see your GP. If you continue to have constant pain, this advice on dealing with back pain does not apply. We recommend that you consult your GP, if you have not already done so. If you have back pain

and suddenly notice any of these rare symptoms, you should see a doctor about them straight away:

- difficulty passing or controlling urine;
- numbness around your back passage or genitals;
- numbness, pins and needles, or weakness in both legs;
- unsteadiness on your feet.

How you can help yourself to stay in work

Do:

- Stay as active as usual, if possible. But, see your doctor if you are worried about the back pain, or if the pain persists or suddenly gets worse.
- Take simple pain relief to help with the pain.
- Speak to your employer, your workers' representative, your safety representative or a trade union safety representative who can relay your issues to your employer and, if necessary, discuss what can be done to help you stay at work.
- Find out about back pain. Good advice can be found in guidance booklets like *The Back Book* and on the BackCare website (see 'Want to know more').

Don't:

- Take to your bed and wait for the pain to go away. The sooner you get back to normal activity, the better.

- Worry. Back pain is rarely serious and unnecessary worry delays recovery.
- Avoid activity simply as a way of avoiding the pain.

Absent from work with back pain

If you are away from work for prolonged periods with back pain, it is important that you stay in regular contact with your employer to make them aware of your situation, to be kept informed about developments at work and to discuss what adjustments might be needed once you are ready to return.

Discuss your needs with your employer and occupational health provider and try to suggest any practical workplace adaptations or alterations which might help you to cope while you return to full-time working. If there is no occupational health provider available, your GP or safety representative may be able to discuss possible work restrictions or adjustments.

Want to know more?

For information about back pain and other musculoskeletal disorders, visit: hse.gov.uk/msd

For information about the Better Backs campaign, visit: www.hse.gov.uk/msd/campaigns

Or call HSE's Infoline on 0845 345 0055 for further information

For more information on managing sickness absence and return to work, visit: www.hse.gov.uk/sicknessabsence

The Back Book The Stationery Office 2002 ISBN 978 0 11 702949 1 www.tso.co.uk

Off work sick and worried about your job? Steps you can take to help your return to work Leaflet INDG397 HSE Books 2004 (single copy free or priced packs of 15 ISBN 978 0 7176 2915 2) www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg397.pdf

BackCare is an independent national charity that helps people manage and prevent back pain: www.backcare.org.uk