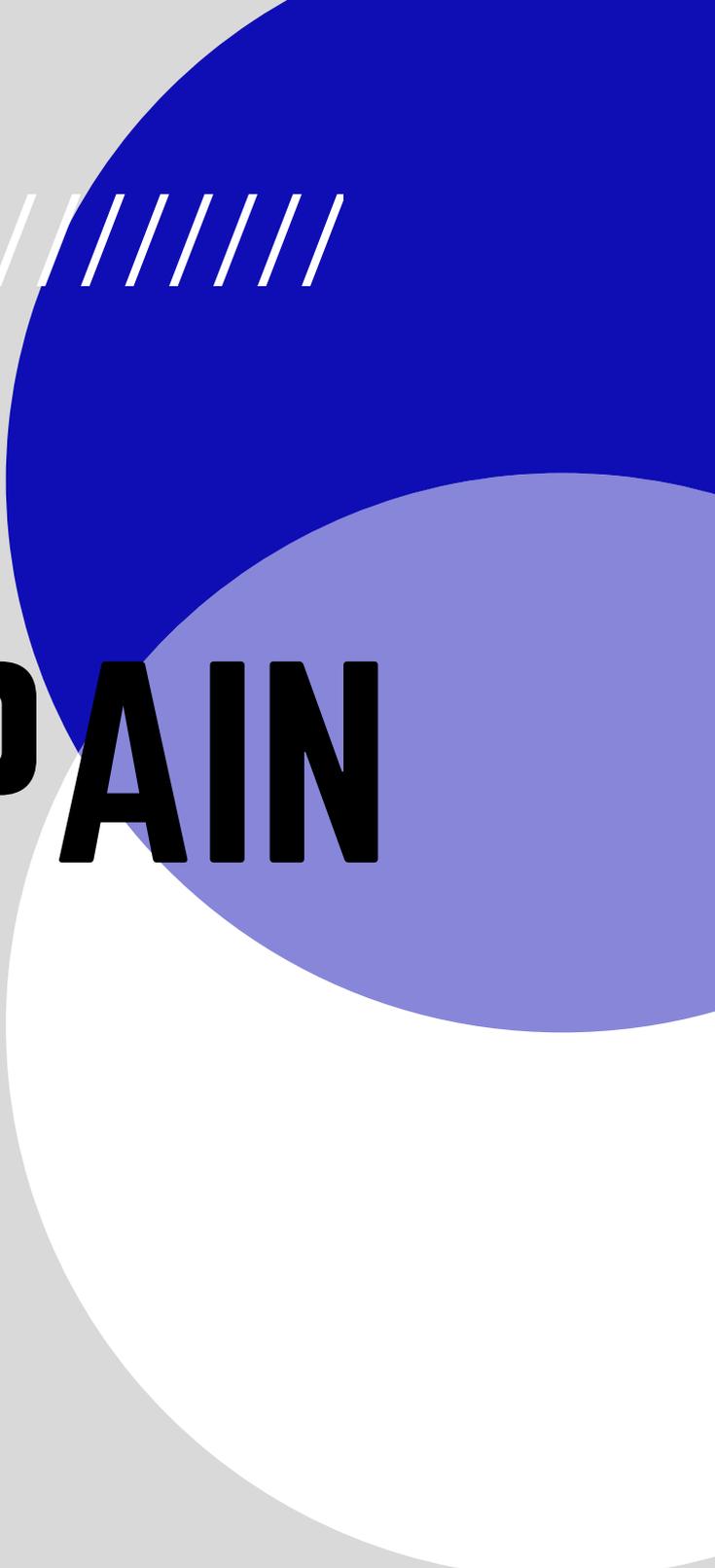
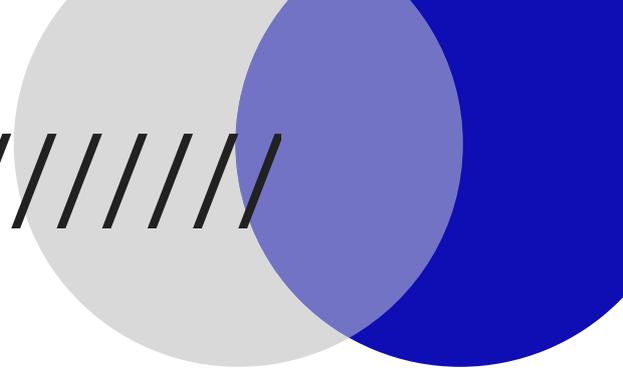


NEW ONSET
(LESS THAN 6 WEEKS)

BACK PAIN GUIDE





ABOUT THIS GUIDE

A bout of back pain can be extremely frustrating as well as worrisome. It is also very common with over 80% of people experiencing it in their lifetime. Recent research and guidelines suggest education about back pain should form an integral part of treatment. This back pain educational guide aims to provide just that. It is specific to a new onset of back pain which is pain that has been present for less than 6 weeks which is known as acute low back pain.

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01

DON'T PANIC!



First of all don't panic. Remember more than 80% of people will get back pain at some point, it is normal to experience back pain and is usually drastically improved after 2-6 weeks.

Although I appreciate that can feel like a long time when you are in pain. It is important not to get too worked up and worry about it, as this has been shown to actually make it worse.

BUT Having said most of the time back pain gets drastically better within 2-6 weeks (which is true) it is also highly likely to return. 70% of people will experience another episode within the next year. We will cover how to help prevent this later on in step 5.

What causes back pain? Well in the vast majority of cases, over 90% no specific cause can be identified. Less than 1% is due to a serious pathology such as a fracture, cancer or an infection. Around 5-10% is due to nerve root pain and this will be accompanied by other symptoms such as pain into the leg along with pins and needles and/or numbness and/or weakness.

The rest of the time (around 90%) no specific case can be identified and is given the label "non-specific" low back pain. So non-specific low back pain makes up the vast majority of back pain we have.

This does not mean that there is no cause! It means that **the causes are multifactorial and complex** and not one specific structure can be identified as the single cause. It also means that in the absence of any indication of a serious or neurological cause any imaging such as MRI scans or x-rays will not tell you what is wrong.

In summary – Don't panic. The vast majority of back pain is not serious and will be drastically improved within 2-6 weeks. In the next section we will cover warning signs to monitor and when it may be important to seek further medical advice.



Warning signs to look out for which *MAY* indicate your back pain is due to something more serious.

As mentioned earlier that vast majority of back pain is not due to anything serious. But sometimes it can be, so what are the indications that you should seek medical advice.

You should seek immediate medical advice by calling 111 or going to A&E if:



You experience loss of your bowel or bladder control, altered sensation such as numbness or tingling in the saddle area (genitals or buttocks) or difficulty urinating.



If your pain came on following a severe trauma such as an accident or fall.

You should seek advice from your GP if:



Your back pain is accompanied by high fever or temperature or came on following a severe illness.



Your pain is worse at night, wakes you up at night and you are unable to get back to sleep.



If your pain is constant and not eased by rest or related to physical activity



If you have or have previously had cancer such as prostate, breast, kidney or liver cancer.



You might feel like all you want to do is rest however this can cause the back to cease up and the muscles to loose some of their strength, it is probably one of the worst things you can do. It is well established that **keeping active** will lead to a **faster recovery**. Listen to the pain though and do not over do it by doing anything that makes the pain feel a lot worse, but **moderate activity such as walking and everyday tasks should ease your recovery**.

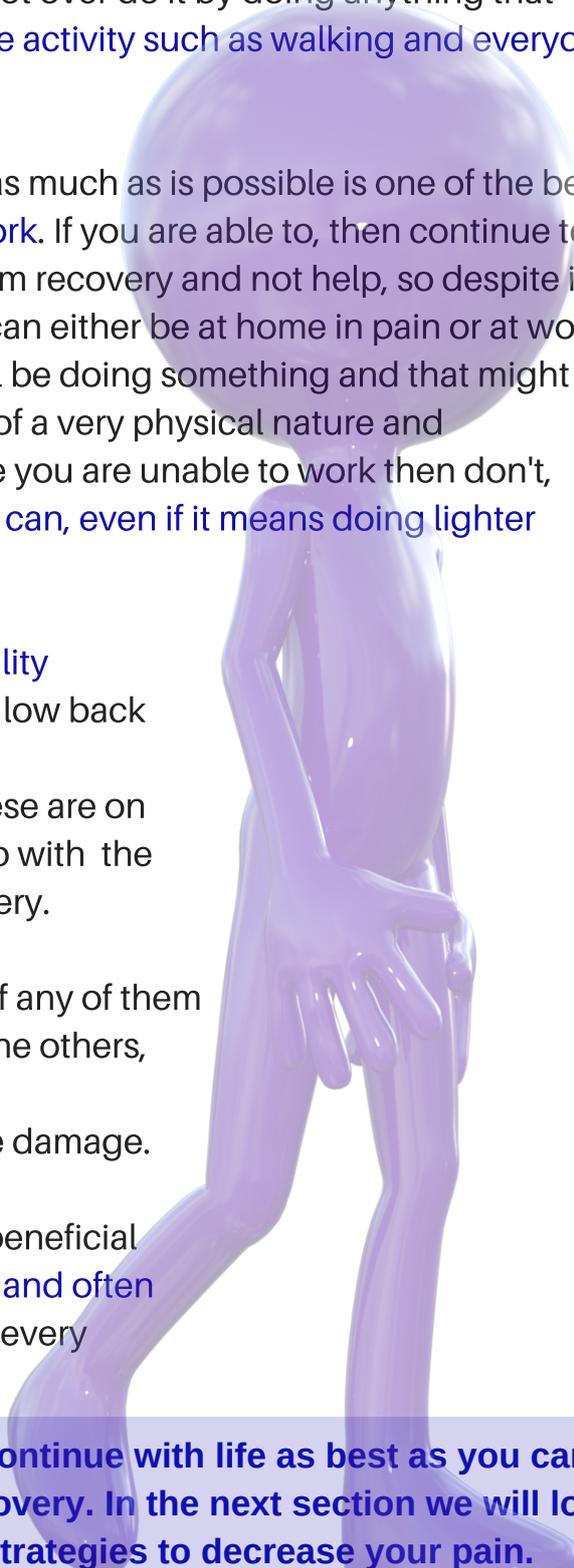
Trying to continue with your daily activities as much as is possible is one of the best things you can do. This **includes going to work**. If you are able to, then continue to work. Taking time off has been shown to harm recovery and not help, so despite it being painful you are best off working. You can either be at home in pain or at work in pain- but at least if you are at work you will be doing something and that might take your mind off it. Obviously if your job is of a very physical nature and aggravates the pain or if the pain is so severe you are unable to work then don't, but, **try to get back to work as quickly as you can, even if it means doing lighter duties**.

You might also want to do some **gentle mobility exercises**. Good examples are the cat-camel, low back rotations, knee to chest and back extension exercises. Information on how to perform these are on the next few pages. These exercises can help with the movement in your back and speed up recovery.

They should not be painful to do though so if any of them are painful don't do those ones and just do the others, although it doesn't matter if they are slightly uncomfortable- you will not be causing more damage.

If you find one of the exercises is especially beneficial then do this one more. **Do the exercises little and often throughout the day**- maybe even as often as every couple of hours if you are able.

In summary it is best to keep active and continue with life as best as you can, despite the pain. It will speed up your recovery. In the next section we will look at ways to help you do this by exploring at strategies to decrease your pain.





Low back rotations - in laying

- Start off by laying face up and both of your knees bent
- Lower your knees to one side keeping your shoulders on the floor.
- Go as far as is comfortable and you might feel a slight stretch in your lower back
- Bring your knees back up the start position and then lower them to the other side
- Repeat this for ten repetitions (so 10 times each side)





Cat-Camel exercise

- Start off with on all fours with your shoulders above your hands and your knees below your hips.
- Curve your back towards the ceiling
- Now arch your back
- Repeat this movement in a slow, controlled and smooth way.
- Up and down is one repetition-repeat for 12 repetitions
- There is no need to hold it in the top and bottom positions it is the movement we are after more than the stretch.
- It should also be pain free so if it hurts near the top or bottom then dont go quite so far and do the movements in a pain free way.





Knee to chest exercise

- Lay face up and hold one knee in your hand with the other leg bent
- Pull your knee up to your chest- hold it there for a second and then relax it again (*but do not let leg go of the knee- keep hold of it*)
- Pull it up to the chest again for a second and relax
- Repeat this so you have pulled it up to the chest 10 times and then repeat on the other side





Back extensions

- Lay face down on the floor with your hands flat by your shoulders or head
- Push yourself up off the floor but keep your pelvis on the floor so that your lower back arches
- Hold this for a second and then lower back down and repeat
- Do this for 10 repetitions



Using ice/ heat to reduce pain

If there was no specific injury to cause your back pain (it just came on by itself) guidelines recommend using heat to help relieve the pain.

However if your back pain came on as the result of an injury such as lifting something too heavy and/or twisting awkwardly then for the first 48hrs ish you might like to try ice instead.

It is important to choose whatever works best for you- but unless you are in the early stages of an injury it is recommended to use heat. You might also like to try alternating between heat and ice.

If using heat- use a covered hot water bottle, wheat bag or heat wrap (they are much better than the heat creams which do not actually heat up any of the body tissue under the skin)

Put it on the area for around 20 mins and repeat this up to every hour or so. You can also have a hot bath or shower to help provide pain relief.

If using ice – use a cold/ice pack or bag of frozen peas and cover with a damp tea towel. Apply it to the back for 20mins and repeat every hour.

Using medication to get pain relief

If you are not getting enough relief using heat or ice you might like to try some over the counter pain killers such as [ibuprofen](#). Paracetamol is not recommended as studies have shown it to be ineffective for back pain. Ibuprofen has more risks associated to taking it and you should always read the label to be aware of these risks and speak to a pharmacist if you are unsure about taking them.

Other stronger medications such as codeine or muscle relaxants such diazepam can be effective but due to the risks and side effects are not recommended for routine use with low back pain. They should only be used selectively and with caution. It is best to discuss this with your GP and they should only be taken for as short a time as possible due to the side effects.

In summary- apply heat to the area for 20 mins at a time a few times per day (or if it is a recent injury use ice for the first 48-72 hours) If this is not providing enough relief then try over the counter pain medications such as ibuprophen and if this still doesn't provide enough relief you can speak to your GP about other options.

In the next section we will look at seeking treatment for acute low back pain and what treatment is effective.

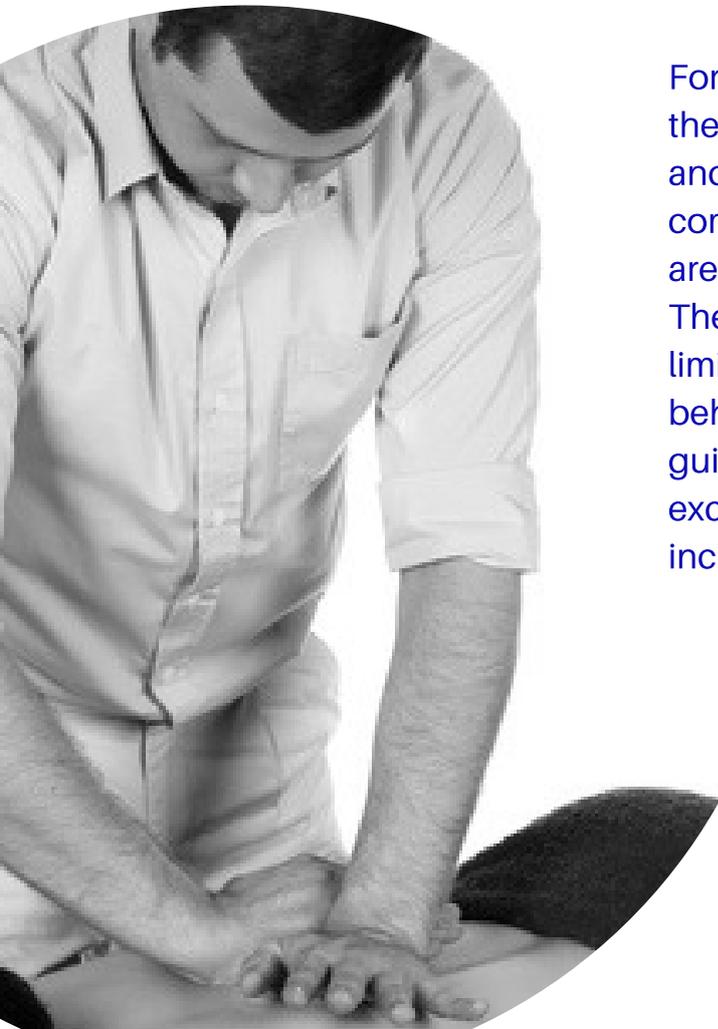




If you are worried about the pain, it is getting worse or has not started to subside after a couple of weeks you can seek specific advice or treatment from a professional. If the pain is going down the leg and you are getting pins and needles or altered sensation in the leg it is good to seek professional advice in this instance too.

It is advisable to seek advice from a regulated health care professional that commonly treats back pain such as a Chiropractor, Physiotherapist or Osteopath as these professions are regulated. This means they are properly qualified and will not be able to call themselves by that title unless they are registered with the governments regulatory body. To do this they must have a minimum of University degree education.

These three professions will commonly treat musculoskeletal problems such as back pain and are able to perform a proper examination and provide appropriate treatment to help you recover. Whoever you choose it is important that they listen to you, take your preferences into account when treating you and it is essential they give you advice as to what you can do to help yourself.



For a new onset (less than 6 weeks) According to the latest high quality research that was summarised and published in the Lancet effective treatment to compliment education and the advice to keep active are spinal manipulation, acupuncture and massage. They also state supervised exercise therapy can be of limited use in selected patients as can cognitive behavioural therapy. This is similar to the UK guidelines issued by NICE (national institute of clinical excellence) although the NICE guidelines do not include acupuncture.



As was said previously the vast majority of back pain will be significantly improved after 2-6 weeks. However unfortunately more commonly than not (70% of the time) it will recur in the next 12 months. So what can be done to help prevent this?

Exercise! Exercise alone or in combination with education is effective in the prevention of low back pain.

Education based on the science of why we feel pain has been shown to be superior to education based on anatomy and ergonomic advice on lifting.

It does not appear that any form of exercise is better than any other so what is important is that **you do exercise you enjoy doing**. This is because if you enjoy doing it you are more likely to continue doing it. Jogging, walking, swimming, cycling, pilates, yoga, Tai Chi, working out at the gym. All of these are examples of exercises that will help prevent back pain. A graded exercise programme to increase fitness levels is important. However it **doesn't necessarily have to be exercise or sporting activity**. **Increasing your general physical activity** levels through vigorous cleaning, gardening or walking- will also help guard against and prevent a future recurrence of back pain.

Sometimes though **for some people back pain is a recurrent condition** and like some people get cold sores some people get recurrent back pain. If you do get another bout of it- don't get frustrated - easy to say I know but **frustration will cause more tension in the back and make it worse**.

Be reassured that it is unlikely to be due to any damage- it doesn't mean something is wrong with your back and it will subside- **do the things you have found to be beneficial in previous episodes and wait for it to pass**.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mark is passionate about decreasing the burden musculoskeletal problems are having on our society, with a special interest and expertise in the field of back pain management and spinal pain. He works as a Chiropractor in Lincolnshire

“Pain can have a huge effect on peoples quality of life, empowering people to lead more fulfilling lives without pain holding them back is something that is very important to me.”

Mark has always had a keen interest in science, the human body and sport which led him to peruse a degree in Chemistry and Sports Science that he completed at Loughborough University, which is regarded as one of the best in the World for Sport Science.

“This gave me a great understanding of human physiology, it is where I first began to learn the importance of exercise and diet and its relationship to health, it’s what ignited my passion in this area”



After completing his first degree he went on to do a 4 year Masters Degree to become a Chiropractor. In his first year of practice he completed a Post graduate Training Scheme with the College of Chiropractors.

Mark has completed further University based post graduate qualifications, gaining a distinction for a PG(Cert) in clinical development. He has a strong interest in research and completed a post grad evidence based practice masters module which led to him presenting his research at international conferences.

Mark is a registered Chiropractor with the general Chiropractic Council, a member of the British Chiropractic association and also a member of the Royal college of Chiropractors where he is actively involved in the pain faculty.