

## **Back Matters**

A self help guide to managing low back pain

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### **Key things to know:**

- Most people get better
- Your spine is strong and it is designed to move
- There are lots of self-help treatments that you can use. Further investigations are rarely needed
- There is additional help available, if you need it.

### **What is back pain?**

Back pain is very common, with 8 out of 10 people experiencing some back pain in their life. Most back problems can settle within 6 weeks. The spine is strong and back problems are rarely due to anything serious. Your spine is designed to move although stiffness can occur as you get older. Your back problem may cause hot, burning, shooting, or stabbing pains into one or both of your legs (sometimes called sciatica). You may also get pins and needles in one or both of your legs. This is normal and usually heals by itself.

### **Should I rest to help my back get better?**

You should keep moving, even if you move slowly at first. Try to continue the activities you would normally do and stay at/ return to work. Change positions regularly wherever you are and try to find a position that reduces any pain. Try not to carry out activities which make the pain worse. Try not to sit down or rest for long periods of time as resting in bed does not help to cure back pain.

### **Medication**

Some over the counter painkillers may help. If you have any questions or concerns about medication, you should speak to a pharmacist or your GP. Use painkillers as and when required and do not take more than the recommended dosage. Always follow the information on the prescription or advice leaflet when taking medication.

### **Heat & Ice**

Heat packs/hot water bottles can help to ease pain and stiffness.

An ice pack (for example a bag of frozen peas) can also be helpful for pain relief.

If using a heat or ice pack, protect your skin from direct contact by wrapping the pack in a cloth or towel before using it. Do not place heat or ice packs directly onto your skin.

## Stay Active

Keeping active is an important part of your treatment and recovery. It is best to do a little exercise regularly to start to build up your activity levels.

### Benefits of being active:

1. Can help prevent future back pain
2. Maintains fitness levels (even if you have to modify what you normally do, any activity is better than none)
3. Keeps your other muscles and joints strong and flexible
4. Prevents weight gain
5. Improves your mood and relieves stress.

## Complimentary Therapies

Currently national guidelines do not support the use of complimentary therapies (such as acupuncture) for low back pain so these are not routinely offered by the NHS. On an individual level, some people feel complimentary therapies and herbal remedies help to manage their pain in the short term.

## Smoking

People who smoke usually recover slower and are at a higher risk of recurrent sciatica than non- smokers. In some cases, stopping smoking appears to reduce this risk. If you decide to stop smoking, you should contact your local pharmacy or GP for help and advice. You can also find more information on quitting on the NHS inform website:

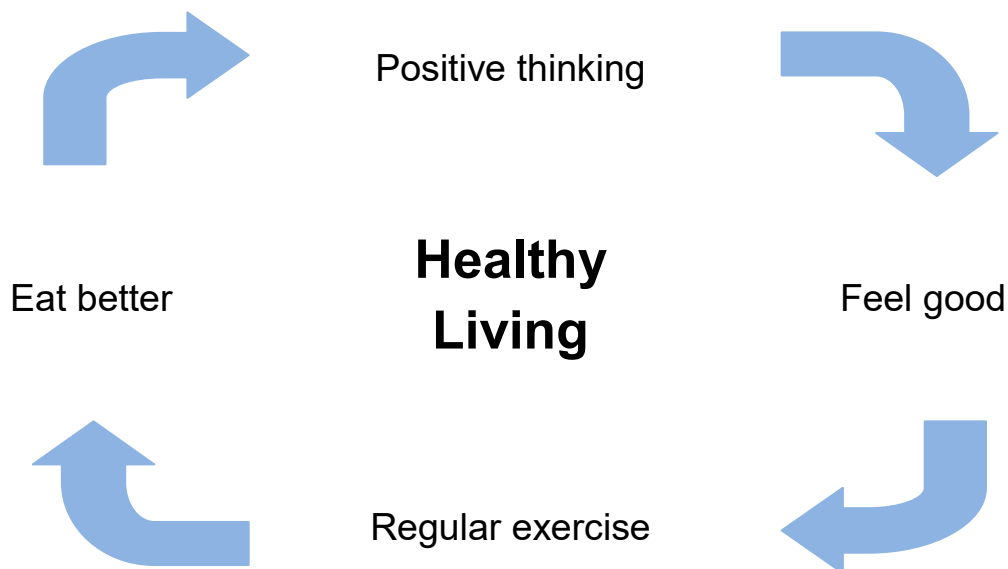
<https://www.nhsinform.scot/campaigns/quit-your-way-scotland>

## Healthy Living

There is a link between increased weight and low back pain as it can cause more strain on your back and increase your risk of developing back pain. You can find advice on healthy living on the NHS Inform website:

<https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/food-and-nutrition/healthy-eating-and-weight-loss/how-to-lose-weight-safely>

For those who need more support, NHS Lothian Weight Management Services can provide advice and also exercise classes. You can be referred to this service by your GP or Health Professional.



## Staying At Work

It is recommended that you try to remain at work or that you try to return to work as soon as you feel able. You should speak to your employer and your GP about any specific difficulties that you are having.

You may need to have an Occupational Health assessment to see if any of your activities need to be modified. Things you can try are: changing your position regularly and avoid sitting or standing in one position for long periods of time. If you would like further advice about your workplace, there is information available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/how-to-sit-correctly/>

## Do I need to see my doctor?

If you follow the advice given and take the right medication, you will not usually need to see your GP. Back pain usually improves over the first 6 weeks.

If you experience any of the following, speak to your GP as soon as possible:

- Generally feeling unwell
- Back pain that starts when you're ill with other problems (such as rheumatoid arthritis)
- Unsteadiness when you walk.

## Will my back pain get better?

In most cases, back pain will get better in 6 weeks. You may find that your pain will return now and again after your initial episode. Most people with back pain manage to continue with a normal life and stay at work.

## Do I need to have any investigations?

In most cases, back pain will get better in time so further investigations are not needed.

## Is my back pain something serious?

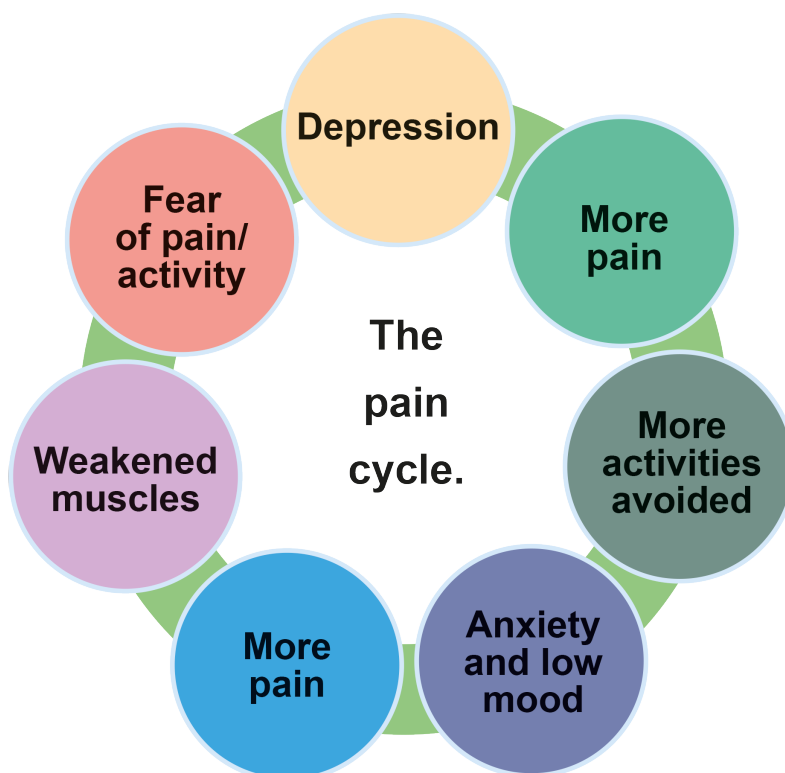
If you develop any of the following symptoms, seek medical help immediately:

- Sudden or new difficulty passing or controlling urine
- Numbness or altered feeling around your back passage or genitals
- Pins and needles around your back passage or genitals.

Call 111 (NHS 24) urgently if you develop any of the above symptoms. Urgent surgery may be needed if you lose bladder or bowel control or the use of your legs but this is extremely rare.

## Why does some back pain not get better?

A lack of activity may impact on your recovery from your back pain. It is important to keep active even when you have low back pain. A lack of activity can cause the back muscles to become weak. This means your muscles tire more easily and your back may feel further strain. You may also lose your confidence and ability to do your everyday activities- affecting your work, social life and personal relationships. You may start to feel worried or depressed which can make your pain feel worse. If you are anxious or depressed you may not feel like exercising and the muscles become weaker still ... And so the cycle goes on. We call this the pain cycle. This can affect anyone. It is important to recover your confidence in your back and start to move again to help break this cycle.



## Further Information

For further advice and information you can visit the NHS inform webpage at: <https://www.nhsinform.scot/> or download the NHS 24 MSK Help app for your smart phone <https://www.nhsinform.scot/care-support-and-rights/tools-and-apps/nhs-24-msk-help-app>

# Back Pain

## Myth Busters

The latest evidence has disproved these myths about what is best for your back.

### Myth 1

Moving will make my back pain worse

#### Fact

People fear twisting and bending but it's essential to keep moving. Gradually increase how much you are doing and stay on the go.

### Myth 2

I should avoid exercise, especially weight training

#### Fact

Back pain shouldn't stop you enjoying exercise or regular activities. In fact, studies found that continuing with these can help you get better sooner- including using weights where appropriate.

### Myth 3

A scan will show me exactly what is wrong

#### Fact

Sometimes it will but most often it won't. Also, even people without back pain have changes in their spine so scans can cause fear that influences behaviour, making the problem worse.

### Myth 4

Pain = damage

#### Fact

This was the established view but more recent research has changed our thinking. Modern physiotherapy takes a holistic approach that helps people understand why they are in pain.

See all the myths and facts at: [www.csp.org.uk](http://www.csp.org.uk) and search for "Myth Busters"