

Useful telephone numbers

Physiotherapy
20007184

Gibraltar Sports and Leisure Authority:
200 78409

Exercises for older adults
200 76522

GSLA swimming pool
200 72869

Kings bastion leisure centre
200 44777 reception
200 59834 fitness gym

Contact details for numerous private gyms and fitness centres as well as privately run Pilates and Yoga classes are available in the telephone directory.

References:

NICE guidelines for Low back pain: early management of persistent non-specific low back pain Full guideline May 2009

Johnson RE, Jones GT, Wiles NJ, Chaddock C et al. Active exercise, education, and cognitive behavioral therapy for persistent disabling low back pain: a randomized controlled trial. *Spine*. 2007; 32 (15):1578-1585.

Steenstra IA, Anema JR, Bongers PM, de-Vet H-CW et al. The effectiveness of graded activity for low back pain in occupational healthcare. *Occup Environ Med*. 2006; 63 (11):718-725.



The Back Book

The best way to deal with back
pain

Gibraltar Health Authority
Physiotherapy Department



LEWIS STAGNETTO
REHABILITATION UNIT
PHYSIOTHERAPY
SERVICES
ST BERNARD'S HOSPITAL

A NEW APPROACH TO BACK PAIN

Back pain is very common and causes a great deal of misery, but fortunately serious or permanent damage is rare. There has been a revolution in thinking about back care, and now we deal with it in a different way. This booklet sets out the facts and shows you how to get better as quickly as possible. It is based on the latest research.

What you do about back pain yourself is usually more important than the exact diagnosis or treatment.

An attack of back pain can be alarming. Even a minor back strain can be very painful and it is natural to think that something dreadful might have happened, but stop and look at the facts:

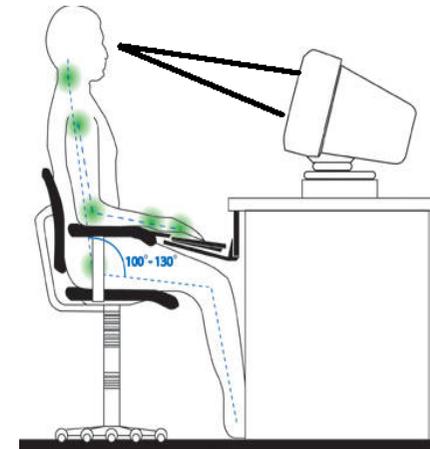
Back Facts

- Most back pain is not due to any serious disease
- The acute pain usually improves within days or a few weeks, at least enough to get on with your life. The long-term outlook is good.
- Sometimes aches and pain can last for quite a long time, but that does not mean it is serious. It usually settles eventually—even though it is frustrating that no one can predict exactly when! Most people can get going quite quickly, even while they still have some pain.
- About half the people who get backache will get it again within a couple of years. But that does not mean it is serious. Between attacks most people return to normal activities with little if any pain.
- **What you do in the early stages is very important. Rest for more than a day or two usually does not help, and may actually prolong pain and disability.**
- **Your back is designed for movement: it needs movement—a lot of movement!** The sooner you get moving and doing your ordinary activities as normally as possible the better.
- **The people who cope best with back pain are those who stay active and get on with life despite the pain.**

Causes of back pain

Your spine is one of the strongest parts of your body. It is made of solid bony blocks joined by discs to give it strength and flexibility. It is reinforced by strong ligaments, and surrounded by large and powerful muscles that protect it. Most simple back strains do not cause any lasting damage.

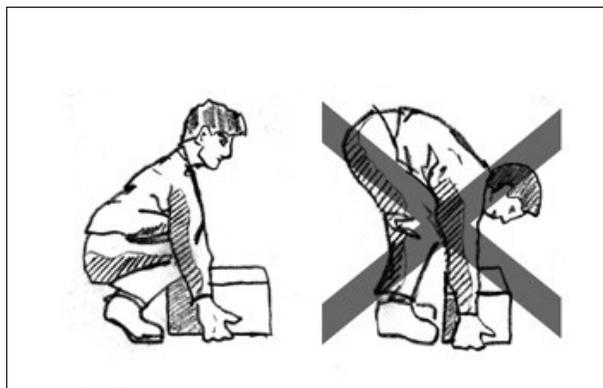
How to set up your desk



Posture

- Position your hips so that they are slightly higher than your knees while your feet are flat on the floor.
- Don't keep your feet flat on the floor. Move them around often. Use a foot rest if you have one, but only part of the time. Do NOT cross your ankles.
- Lean back slightly. Leaning the trunk back to somewhere between 100-130 degrees from parallel to the floor will open up the hips and ease pressure on the pelvis. Make sure your chair back will support your shoulders at this angle while still providing good lumbar support. Use a towel or cushion in the small of your back to help.
- Hold your head slightly up so that it is roughly perpendicular to the floor.
- Let your upper arms hang naturally from your shoulders.
- Let your lower arms rest on the arm rests of your chair either parallel or slightly below, to the floor.
- Keep your wrists straight.
- Take frequent breaks. 10 minutes for every hour of work and 30 second micro-breaks every 10 minutes is a good schedule.
- Stretch during those breaks.

Change your position frequently. Move your feet, lift your arms, adjust your hips, and just make sure to subtly alter your posture continuously throughout the work day.



Remember

- **Never bend your back to pick something up.** It's just not worth the damage that improper lifting technique can cause.
- **Hold the object close to your body.** You are a much more stable lifter if you're not reaching for an object.
- **Don't twist or bend.** Face in the direction you are walking. If you need to turn, stop, turn in small steps, and then continue walking.
- **Keep your eyes up.** Looking slightly upwards will help you maintain a better position of the spine.

Despite what you may have heard

- Only a few people with back pain have a slipped disc or a trapped nerve. Even then it usually gets better by itself with time. Very few back problems ever need surgery.
- **X-rays and MRI scans can detect serious spinal injuries, but they don't usually help in ordinary back pain. They may even be misleading.** Doctors sometimes mention 'degeneration' or wear and tear, which sounds frightening, but it is not damage or arthritis. These are normal changes with age—just like grey hair.
- Your doctor or therapist will not be able to pinpoint the source of your pain. Again it is frustrating not to know exactly what is wrong. Actually, in another way it is good news—you do not have any serious damage to your spine.

Most back pain comes from the working parts of your back—the muscles, ligaments and small joints. Your back is simply not moving and working as it should. You can think of it being 'out of condition'. So what you should do is get your back moving and working properly again. This stimulates its natural ability to recover.

Rest or stay active?

The old fashioned treatment for back pain was rest. Some people with back pain were sent to bed for weeks, even months on end, just waiting for the pain to disappear. **We now know that complete bed rest for a day or two is the worst possible treatment, because in the long term it actually prolongs the pain:**

- **You get stiff**
- **Your muscles get weak**
- **Your bones get weaker**
- **You lose physical fitness**
- **You get depressed**
- **The pain feels worse**
- **It is harder and harder to get going again**
-

No wonder it didn't work! Bed rest is no longer used to treat any common condition, and it is time to stop bed rest for back pain.

You may be limited in how much you can do when the pain is bad, you may be forced to take frequent rests at the start, but only for a day or two. Bed rest is not a treatment—it is simply a short term consequence of the pain.

The most important thing is to get moving again as soon as you can.

Activity is good

Your whole body must keep active to stay healthy. It thrives on use. Regular physical activity:

- Develops your muscles
- Keeps you supple
- Gives you strong bones
- Makes you fit
- Makes you feel good
- Releases natural chemicals that reduce pain

Even when your back is painful you can make a start without putting too much stress on it.

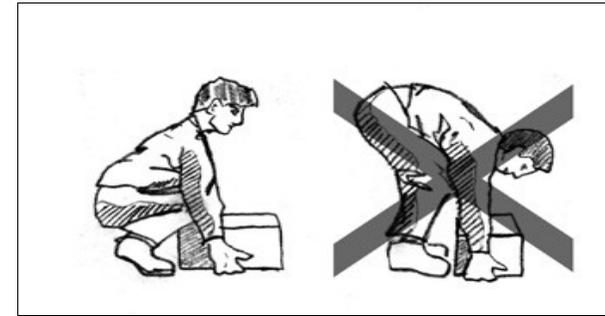
- Walking
- Swimming
- Exercise bike
- Dancing/ yoga/ keep fit
- In fact, most daily activities and hobbies.

Exercise gets your back moving again by stretching tight muscles and joints, and stops the working parts seizing up. It also makes your heart and lungs work and improves physical fitness. Different things suit different people. Experiment, find what works best for you and your back. But your goal is to get moving and steadily increase your level of activity. **Do a little bit more every day.**

Getting stiff joints and muscles working can be painful. Athletes accept that when they start training: their muscles can hurt and the need to work through the pain barrier, but that does not mean they are doing any damage. **So don't worry if exercises make you a bit sore at first—this is usually a sign that you are actually making progress! As you get fitter the pain should ease off. The exercises at the back of this book are a good place to start.**

No one pretends it is easy. Painkillers and other treatments can help control the pain to let you get started, **but you still have to do the hard work. There is no other way. You have a straight choice: rest and get worse, or get active and get better.**

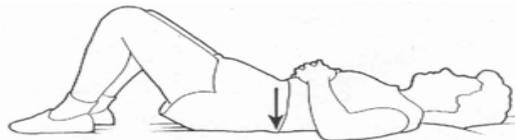
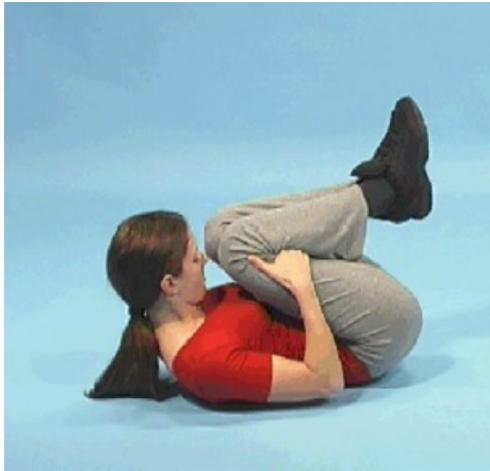
Do not fall into the trap of thinking it will be easier in a week or two, next month, next year. It will not! The longer you put it off, the harder it will be to get going again. **The faster you get back to normal activities and back to work, the better.** Gibraltar has many places to exercise both on your own and under supervision, contact the local gyms, leisure centres, and look for places that offer Pilates or yoga classes. The Victoria stadium and the main pool at the GASA also offer a good facilities in which to exercise, and run a programme for the older adult at times to suit you, telephone numbers are on the back page of this book.



- **Plan ahead before lifting.** Knowing what you're doing and where you're going will prevent you from making awkward movements while holding something heavy. Clear a path, and if lifting something with another person, make sure both of you agree on the plan.
- **Lift close to your body.** You will be a stronger, and more stable lifter if the object is held close to your body rather than at the end of your reach. Make sure you have a firm hold on the object you are lifting, and keep it balanced close to your body.
- **Feet shoulder width apart.** A solid base of support is important while lifting. Keep the feet about shoulder width apart and take short steps.
- **Bend your knees and keep your back straight.** Practice the lifting motion before you lift the object, and think about your motion before you lift. Focus on keeping your spine straight—raise and lower to the ground by bending your knees.
- **Tighten your stomach muscles.** Tightening your abdominal muscles will hold your back in a good lifting position and will help prevent excessive force on the spine.
- **Lift using your legs.** Your legs are many times stronger than your back muscles—let your strength work in your favour. Again, lower to the ground by bending your knees, not your back. Keeping your eyes focused upwards helps to keep your back straight.
- **If you're straining, get help.** If an object is too heavy, or awkward in shape, make sure you have someone around who can help you lift.

Exercises to get your back moving

In a comfortable position on your bed, gently tilt your pelvis into the bed by tightening your stomach muscles, hold for a few seconds and rotate your pelvis in the opposite direction to move the small of your back away from the bed. Repeat this process to move your back through its full range of movement for a few minutes.



In a comfortable position on your bed, gently tilt your pelvis into the bed by tightening your stomach muscles, hold for a few seconds and rotate your pelvis in the opposite direction to move the small of your back away from the bed. Repeat this process to move your back through its full range of movement for a few minutes.

Dealing with an attack of back pain

Most people manage to deal with most attacks themselves. What you do depends on how bad your back feels. However, because there is no serious damage, you can usually:

- Use something to control the pain
- Modify your activities for a time, if necessary
- Stay active and get on with your life.

Some people have more persistent pain, but the same principles apply.

Control of pain

There are many treatments which can help—even if there is no miracle cure. **They may not remove the pain completely, but they should control it enough to let you get active and so make yourself better.**

Painkillers

You should not hesitate to use painkillers if you need them. You can safely mask the pain to get active: your body will not let you do any harm. Paracetamol or Panadol is the simplest and safest painkiller. Or you can use anti-inflammatory tablets like ibuprofen.

It may surprise you, but these simple over the counter painkillers are often the most effective for back pain. The problem is that many people do not use them properly. **You should take the full recommended dose and take them regularly every 4-6 hours—do not wait until your pain is out of control. You should take them for a few days, but you may require them for a week or two. Few people require anything stronger.**

Do not take ibuprofen or aspirin if you are pregnant, or have asthma, indigestion or an ulcer.

Heat and cold

Heat or cold can be used for short-term relief of pain and to relax muscle tension. In the first 48 hours you can try a cold pack on the painful area for 5-10 minutes at a time—a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel. Other people prefer heat—a hot water bottle, a bath or shower.

Massage

Massage is one of the oldest treatments for back pain. Many people find gentle rubbing of the muscles of the back eases the pain and relaxes muscle spasm.

Manipulation

Doctors now agree that manipulation and mobilisation can help back pain. It is safe if done by a qualified professional: osteopaths, chiropractors, physiotherapists, and a few doctors with special training. **You should begin to feel the benefit within a few sessions, it should not be necessary to have treatment for months on end.**

Other treatments

Many other treatments such as electro-therapy machines, acupuncture, or alternative medicine are used for back pain, and some people feel they help, but be realistic. Despite the claims, these treatments rarely provide a quick fix. Once again you should feel any benefit quite quickly, and there is no value in treatment for months on end. **What really matters is whether they help you get active and allow you to manage your pain yourself!**

Anxiety, stress and muscle tension

Anxiety and stress can increase the amount of pain that we feel. Tension can cause muscle spasm, and the muscles themselves can become painful.

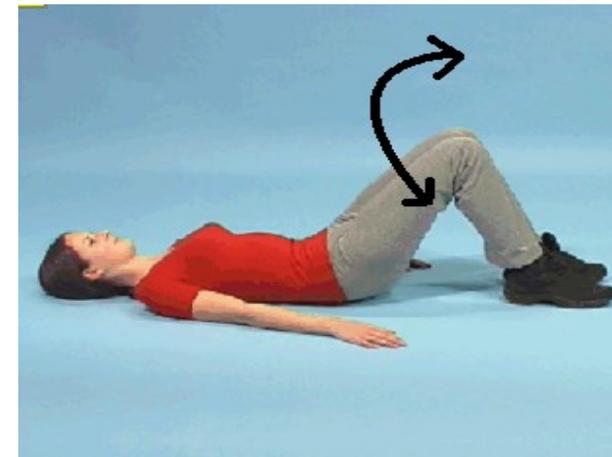
Many people can get anxious about back pain, especially if it does not get better as fast as they expect. You may get conflicting advice from your family and friends, or even from doctors or therapists—which may make you uncertain about what to do. Trust the advice in this booklet—it comes from the latest research. Remember, serious damage is rare and the long term outlook is good. So do not let fear and worry hold you back from your recovery.

Stress can aggravate or prolong pain. If stress is a problem you need to recognise it at an early stage and try to do something about it. You cannot always avoid stress, but you can learn to reduce its effects by controlled breathing, muscle relaxation, and mental calming techniques. One of the best ways to reduce stress and tension is exercise.

Exercises—get yourself moving!

These exercises are a good start to your recovery, they will help your back start moving, do them regularly to help keep yourself moving, they may cause you pain at first as they are moving parts of your back that have become stiff, don't force yourself through the pain, but by doing them little and often this pain should ease.

Find a comfortable position on your bed, bend up your knees to allow your back muscles to relax. Gently rock your knees back and forth from side to side, try to get the bottom part of your back moving by keeping your shoulders on the bed. Only move your legs a small distance, imagine a clock face and move your knees from 10 to 2 o'clock, continue for 1-2 minutes



Lying in the above position can often help reduce your pain, using a pillow underneath your bent knees will allow your back muscles to relax and is a good way to reduce muscle spasm.

Warning signs

If you have severe pain which gets worse over several weeks instead of better, if you are unwell with back pain, or if your normal back pain gets progressively worse, you should see your doctor.

Here are a few symptoms, which are all very rare, but if you do have back pain and suddenly develop any of these, you should see a doctor 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 or dropped foot

Do not let that list worry you too much, these symptoms are very rare.

At the end of the day—it's your back!

We have shown you that back pain is rarely due to anything serious, and it should not cripple you, unless you let it. You have got the facts and the most up to date advice about how to deal with back pain. The important thing now is for you to get on with your life. How your back pain affects you depends on how you react to the pain, and what you do about it yourself.

There is no instant answer. You will have your ups and downs for a while—that is normal—but look at it this way:

There are two types of back pain sufferers;

Ones who avoid activity.

Ones who cope and manage their pain.

The avoider gets frightened by the pain and worries about the future.

- The avoider is afraid that hurting means further damage—**IT DOES NOT!**
- **The avoider rests a lot, and just waits for the pain to get better**

The coper knows that the pain will get better and does not fear the future.

- **The coper carries on as normally as possible**
- **The coper deals with pain by being positive, staying active and getting on with life.**
- **The coper deals with reoccurrences or flare ups in back pain in a positive manner, restarts their exercises and rechecks their posture to see why their pain has returned.**

The risk of chronic pain

There has been a lot of research in recent years to identify people at risk of long term pain and disability. What may surprise you is that most of the warning signs are about what people feel and do, rather than medical findings.

Signs of people at risk of long-term pain:

- **Believing that you have a serious injury or damage. Being unable to accept reassurance.**
- **Believing that hurt means harm and that you will become disabled**
- **Avoiding movement or daily activity due to fear of doing damage**
- **Continued rest and inactivity instead of getting on with your life**
- **Waiting for someone to fix it, rather than believing that you can help yourself recover**
- **Becoming depressed and withdrawn.**

This all develops gradually and you may not even notice. That is why it is important to get going before you develop chronic pain. If you—or your friends and family—spot some of these early warning signs, you need to do something about it. Now, before it's too late. Use the advice in this booklet to work out what you can do to change direction and get on with your life. If you need extra help to get going, you should ask your doctor or therapist.

You may meet a practical problem here. Doctors and therapists deal best with clear-cut diseases and injuries for which they have a cure. We are often not so good at dealing with ordinary symptoms like back pain. **For example, it is no good staying off work and doing nothing for weeks on end while attending/waiting for therapy. Or waiting for months on a waiting list for months for a surgeon to tell you that you do not need an operation.**

This simply delays your recovery! Which is why it really depends on what you do for yourself. You have to make it clear to your doctor or therapist that you realise all this, and what you want is help to get on with your life.

If you are still off work after about a month, you are at risk of developing long-term problems. There is then a 10% risk you will still be off work in a year's time, you could even lose your job. Long before you get to that stage you really need to assess the problem and take urgent action.

How to stay active

As we have explained, the sooner you start getting mobile and active again, the better. Only if the pain is particularly severe do you need to rest up or be off work, but even then you can still do most daily activities, if you think about them first. Work out a plan. What are the problems and how can you get around them? Can you do things in a different way?

Try to strike up a balance between being as active as you can but without putting to much strain on your back. The basic rules are simple:

- **Keep moving**
- **Do not stay in one position for too long**
- **Move about before you stiffen up**
- **Move a little faster each day**
- **Don't stop doing things—just change the way you do them.**
- **Rest when you need, and then carry on with your day.**

Sitting

Choose a chair and position that is comfortable for you—experiment. Try some support with a towel or a pillow in the small of your back. Get up and stretch regularly—take advantage of TV adverts!

Desk Work

Adjust the height of your chair to suit your desk. Arrange your keyboard, mouse and screen so that you do not feel strained, get up and stretch regularly. The pictures at the back of this booklet will help you ensure your work area is set up correctly.

Driving

Adjust your seat from time to time. Try some support in the small of your back. Stop regularly for a few minutes break—get out of your car, walk about and stretch.

Lifting

Think before you lift! Do not lift more than you need to, keep the load close to your body. Do not twist while you are lifting, instead turn with your feet.

Carrying and shopping

Think if you need to carry at all. Carry things hugged to your body, or split the loads between both hands. Do not carry further than you need to.

Daily activities/hobbies

Do not do one thing for too long. Be aware of your posture and regularly change your activity.

Sports

Continuing with your normal sport is fine, but you may need to reduce the intensity. Swimming is good— but be aware of your position in the water and try to change your stroke regularly.

Sleeping

Some people find a firm mattress helps, or you can try a sheet of chipboard underneath your mattress. Experiment. Try painkillers and exercise an hour before you go to bed.

Getting on with your life

It is important to maintain the momentum of life, and that includes staying at work if you possibly can. Doing things will distract you from the pain, and your back will usually not get any worse at work than it will at home. If you have a heavy job you may need some help from your work mates. Simple changes that have been discussed in this booklet, and avoiding bad habits will make your job easier.

If you are seeing a doctor or therapist, tell them about your work. Talk to your supervisor or boss if you need to. Tell them about any parts of your job that may be difficult to begin with, but stress that you want to be at work. Offer your own suggestions about how to overcome these problems—you might even show them this booklet.

If you do have to stay off work, it helps to get back as soon as possible—usually within days or a couple of weeks—even if you still have some pain. The longer you are inactive and off work, the more likely you are to develop long term pain.

If you are not back at work within a month, you should really be planning with your doctor, therapist and employer how and when you can return. If you have an occupational health department. Or health and safety representative, they may be able to assist. Temporary modification to your job or pattern of work may help you get back sooner.

What doctors can and cannot do

Although we may have stressed that you can deal with most back pain yourself, there may be times you are uncertain and feel the need to check with your doctor. That's quite reasonable, but remember that there is no quick fix for back pain. So you should be realistic about what you expect from a doctor or therapist.

Your doctor can:

- Rule out serious spinal problem and reassure you
- Suggest various medications and treatments to help control your pain
- Advise you on how you can best deal with the pain and get on with your life.

Try to accept that reassurance, and do not let needless worry delay your recovery. You have to share responsibility for your own progress. Some doctors and therapists may be hesitant about handing over and letting you take control, so you may have to tell them straight out that this is really what you want.