



Kesson Physiotherapy's Guide to Low Back Pain

INTRODUCTION

We know that experiencing back pain can be frightening. The back plays a key role in everything we do. Having a strong and supple back enables us to walk, stand, sit, run, play sports and sleep without giving it a second thought. When back pain strikes it is not just the pain levels you have to cope with, it also then has a significant impact on our lifestyle.

It is no exaggeration to say that if back pain was a disease the World Health Organisation would declare it a pandemic. One in eight of us are likely to experience it at some point in our lifetime (that's 1 billion people back pain sufferers worldwide!). If you have an outbreak of back pain you have a 70% chance of it reoccurring in 2 years. Back pain can affect anyone but the most common age range is between the 35 -55 year olds. The most common cause is mechanical in nature caused by how your bones, ligaments and muscles work together.

If treated quickly, recovering from back pain can be a straightforward process. It starts to get complicated, however, when the underlying cause of the problem is left untreated. Many of us try to continue with "life as normal" and engage in activities and treatments that are at the end of the day unhelpful.

If your back is playing up then this guide is designed specifically for you, to help you understand what you might be dealing with and what you can do to help.

WHAT IS BACK PAIN?

Back pain can occur anywhere along the spine although it is most commonly experienced between the middle of the back and your bottom. It can start suddenly or come on gradually. The spine is a complex structure and mechanical problems in the back can create pain that can be felt in the back or down to the legs (this is called sciatica).

The majority of back pain cases resolve themselves over a few days of weeks. Particularly when eased with regular movement and people are given the right kind of advice, exercises, stretches and rest.

When back pain has become persistent, lasting over 12 weeks, and severe it is essential to gain advice from a physiotherapist. They will quickly identify if your back pain can be resolved with conservative treatment or if you would benefit from seeing a specialist.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CAUSES OF BACK PAIN?

Lifestyle choices, pre-existing conditions and a person's medical history can all cause back pain. While no-one is immune, it does become more common the older we get. Certain jobs that involve lifting or sitting for long periods of time can increase your chances of developing back pain.

Below are the most common causes of back pain:

Strain - This is the most common cause and can happen after lifting something the 'wrong' way or awkwardly due to it being heavy or an odd shape.

Structural Issues - This is when a change in structure of the spine can cause pain.

These include:

- Sciatica; This feels like a sharp shooting pain that travels through your bottom down the back a leg when you bend over or sit. It is most likely caused by a disc in your spine pressing on a nerve.
- Arthritis; Degenerative changes are a sign of aging and unfortunately unavoidable to most of us. In the back it can cause the spinal canal to become narrow and where the nerve root exits the spinal cord, this can become compressed.
- Kidney stones or infections; In this situation people often complain of feeling pain in their back but find that moving the back does not actually make the pain worse - or better.
- Herniated discs; Your discs are found in between your vertebrae and allow the body to shock absorb. Over time, they can distort in shape (herniate) and if they start to press on the sensitive nerves that pass close by can create pain.

- Scoliosis; Otherwise known as curvature of the spine, which can cause an imbalance in the mechanics of the spine that could lead to back pain.
- Compression fracture; In younger people you would typically see this after a significant high velocity injury such as a road traffic accident or falling from height. Most commonly it is found in women over 70 with Osteoporosis (brittle bones disease)

Posture and daily activities - We cannot stress enough that backs love movement. So often these days our work or home life sees us sitting or standing for long periods of time. This can irritate and weaken the back so it is less accepting when we decide to start playing sports or to move a heavy object. Hence you experience back pain.

And it often isn't the way you are sitting, standing or lying that affects you the most, but more likely the fact you are not regularly changing your position at all.

Non-mechanical causes - In less than 2% of back pain cases, the cause is not to do with the mechanics of the spine but rather comes from a medical condition such as cancer, infection of the spine or shingles. Although these conditions are rare your Physiotherapist would look to rule out these conditions during an initial assessment and if concerned refer you to a specialist for a second opinion.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF LOW BACK PAIN?

Back pain can be experienced in many ways. It can be a mild ache or soreness or it can be an unbearable searing pain. Pain can be intermittent or there all the time. It can be associated with pins and needles or numbness. The most common symptoms that people report are:

- Muscle spasms
- Tight muscles in the back, hips and pelvis
- Stiffness in the lower back that makes walking, standing straight and sitting uncomfortable.
- A sharp, stinging pain that moves from the low back through the hamstrings.
- Pain that increases after prolonged periods of standing or sitting
- Dull aches or soreness within the lower back region

Understanding the length of time and what brings symptoms on is crucial for your Physiotherapist to establish the cause of your back pain and produce an effective treatment programme.

Your Physiotherapist would typically categorise your back pain into one of the below:

Acute pain – This is usually the result of a recent injury or an awkward movement. It usually lasts for a few days or weeks until it finally begins to subside as the body heals itself. Most people just need some reassurance and advice to speed up the healing process.

Subacute low back pain – This kind of pain is usually more drawn out, lasting anywhere between 6-12 weeks. It is usually due to how your body moves (joint pain, muscle strain, etc.). A Physiotherapy assessment is advisable, particularly if the pain persists and worsens to the point of affecting your daily activities and changing the way you are able to move.

Chronic back pain – This is any pain that remains for longer than three months. This kind of back pain usually requires a more thorough physiotherapy assessment and a treatment programme with short, medium and long term goals.

OTHER WAYS LOW BACK PAIN CAN IMPACT YOUR HEALTH

The back is central to every movement we make. If you are experiencing back pain it can easily start to impact your quality of life and reduce your overall activity levels.

Overcompensating for your back pain can lead to you overloading other parts of your body. It is not uncommon for patients to tell us that the pain started in their back but they now are noticing their hip/knee/ankle...insert body part!

It is not uncommon for patients to make appointments for their knee, for example, but during the assessment the physiotherapists quickly realise the problem is coming from the back.

HOW DO YOU TREAT AND PREVENT LOW BACK PAIN?

Once your Physiotherapist understands the cause of your back pain thankfully there are many ways that they can help manage, reduce and resolve your pain, as well as restore your movement. An accurate diagnosis resulting from a thorough assessment is necessary for your speedy and full recovery.

HOME REMEDIES FOR LOW BACK PAIN

No matter what type of back pain you have, self-care can also play a helpful role alongside more comprehensive treatment plan for severe or chronic lower back pain. Here are some things you can try:

Relative rest – This is a simple and effective way of treating the sudden arrival of low back pain. There are still some rules you must follow. Never use ‘complete rest’. Remember backs love movement. Staying still for too long can cause other issues and make getting going again difficult. Try to limit restful periods to 20 minutes maximum during the day and follow it up with gentle exercises recommended by your physio.

Over the counter pain medication – Paracetamol, ibuprofen and naproxen can be very effective in managing short term back pain. Easing the pain allows you to move more freely. It is important to talk to your pharmacist if you are unsure about any medicine and its side effects.

Heat the area – Whether its heat from a hot water bottle, warm bath or a heat wrap, this can be highly effective at easing muscle tension. It can be a real comfort when your pain is bad and allow you to move more freely after or during application.

Altering your activities – Apply the ‘20 minute’ rule. Although backs love movement, too much of the same movement can irritate a sensitive back. Try to limit sitting, walking, standing and lying to no more than 20 minutes at a time.

USE EXERCISE TO MANAGE AND REDUCE LOW BACK PAIN

A core part of physiotherapy is using exercises to mend a painful back. We use particular exercises to achieve certain results. These include:

Stretching – Backs need to be both strong and supple. Often with back pain you lose flexibility. Gentle stretches on specific muscles to get you back to your natural range of movement can reduce your pain levels.

Strengthening – Back pain reduces muscle activity and causes deconditioning. Regaining strength around your back reduces your pain in the long term and improves your overall movement, activity levels and in turn, your quality of life.

Physical Activity – Walking is a great low impact activity that can keep you active during your recovery process. Swimming is even better, as water provides some of the best support and resistance out there. It's also incredibly safe for the back. In general, the higher the impact, the more likely your back pain is to worsen. It's therefore worth limiting your running, jogging, dancing and similar contact sports until your physiotherapist gives you the OK.

SUMMARY

While never pleasant, low back pain is something that will inevitably happen to most of us. In many ways it is the curse of modern life. When your back is one of the main components of your body supporting movement, it's going to experience a fair bit of wear and tear.

That is why it is so important to take care of the health of your lower back. From stretching and strengthening the muscles that support it to practising proper posture and spinal alignment. At the end of the day, prevention is the best treatment. If you are able to maintain a lifestyle when you can take care of your back, then it will take care of you.

TALK TO US ABOUT
YOUR BACK PAIN

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