Low back pain

Back pain facts
- Back pain is a common condition
- Back pain can be very uncomfortable, but it is not usually serious
- Back pain can affect anyone, regardless of age, but it is more common in people who are between 35 and 55 years of age
- There are lots of things you can do to help yourself

Causes of back pain
Only a few people with back pain have a slipped disc or a trapped nerve. In the majority of cases, the cause of back pain can be linked to the way that the bones, muscles and ligaments in the back work together.

X-rays and MRI scans
Can detect serious spinal injuries, but they do not often help in ordinary back pain and can be misleading. Doctors sometime mention ‘degeneration’ which sounds frightening but is essentially normal wear and tear changes that occur with age like grey hair.

Rest or stay active?
Bed rest is not helpful for backs – in the long term it can cause:
- Stiffness
- Muscles and bones weaken
- Decreased physical fitness
- Low mood
- Increased back pain
- It gets harder and harder to get going
- You may be limited in how much you can do when the pain is bad but…
Activity will be beneficial as it:
- Develops your muscles
- Keeps you supple
- Gives you stronger bones
- Makes you fit
- Makes you feel good
- Releases natural chemicals that reduce pain.

Exercise gets your back moving, loosening tight muscles and joints. Getting stiff joints and muscles working can be painful, but that does not mean damage is being done, it is normal at first to feel a little sore, as you get fully fit the pain should ease off.

Control of pain

Pain killers
Over the counter painkillers are usually effective in relieving back pain. Speak to your GP or pharmacists about medication that is appropriate for you. Taking pain medication will allow you to get your back moving.

Heat and cold
Heat and cold can be used for short term relief of pain and to relax muscle tension. Simply wrap an ice pack or bag of frozen peas in a damp towel and apply for approximately 10 minutes. Other people prefer heat. Use a hot water bottle or a warm bath or shower.

Anxiety, stress and muscle tension
- Anxiety and stress can increase the amount of pain we feel
- Tension can cause muscle spasm
- Stress can aggravate or prolong pain

If stress is a problem then you need to recognise it at any early stage and try to do something about it. You can reduce the effects of stress with controlled breathing, muscle relaxation and mental calming techniques.

The risk of long term pain
Research in recent years has identified people at risk of long term pain and disability.
Your risk increases if you:
- Believe you have serious injury or damage
- Believe that hurt means harm
- Avoid movement due to fear of doing damage
- Continue rest and inactivity instead of getting on with life
- Wait for someone to fix it rather than believing that you can help yourself
- Become withdrawn and depressed
If you recognize any of these and you feel you need extra help ask your GP or physiotherapist. Following the advice in this leaflet may help to increase your activity levels.

**How to stay active**
You need to strike a balance between staying active and not putting too much strain on your back. The basic rules are:
- Do not stay in one position for too long
- Move about before you stiffen up
- Move a little further and faster each day
- Don’t stop doing things - but change the way do them.

You will have good days and bad days which is normal. Doctors and your physiotherapist can help ease the pain but only you can get your back moving.

**Warning signs**
If you have severe back pain which gets worse over several weeks instead of better, or if you feel unwell with back pain, you should see your doctor. Other symptoms that are rare but must be highlighted to your doctor straight away include:
- Difficulty passing or controlling urine
- Numbness around your back passage
- Numbness, pins and needles, or weakness in both legs
- Unsteadiness on your feet

**Physiotherapy**
Your GP may refer you to physiotherapy. A physiotherapist will be able to teach you a series of exercises that strengthen your back and improve your flexibility. They may also teach you how to improve your posture and reduce future strain on your back.

Please view our online video for preventing back strain, ‘You and your back’. This gives advice for lifting, posture and carrying.