TAKING CARE OF YOUR BACK

A physiotherapy guide to treating and preventing back pain
Disclaimer

The information in this booklet is not designed for use by people with a recent serious back injury - please seek advice from a health professional if you are unsure.

The content is not intended as a substitute for care from a physiotherapist or other health care professional. If you experience signs or symptoms of injury, disease or illness you should seek the advice of a physiotherapist or other health care professional.

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# Taking Care of Your Back

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About back pain</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of back pain</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back pain facts</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your back at risk?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging the myths</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment - how to get better</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How physiotherapy can help</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient stories</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking care of your back - tips to prevent back pain</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes page</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful resources</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABOUT BACK PAIN

Over 80% of New Zealander’s will experience back pain in their lifetime, so chances are you’re one of them!

If you’ve experienced back pain then you’ll know it can impact on all sorts of daily activities including your home, sport, work and general movements. The first thing to remember is that most back pain is not due to a serious disease or health condition - and it can be helped. Research now clearly demonstrates that simply staying active can reduce your back pain and shorten recovery time in many cases.

Physiotherapy New Zealand designed this guide to help you understand your back pain and how to manage it.

In the following pages we’ll cover: types of back pain; how physiotherapy can help you; back pain myths that you need to be aware of; and (most importantly) how you can take care of your back and avoid problems in the future.

You may be surprised at the simple changes that can make a difference.
TYPES OF BACK PAIN

The area most commonly affected by back pain is the lower back - what we call the lumbar region. This is the part of your back that is working when you bend, stoop or sit down.

If you have pain here you might feel tense, stiff or sore in the ‘small’ of your back - that’s where the spine curves inwards above your buttocks. This is the most common type of back pain and is often referred to as ‘nonspecific’ back pain. The exact cause of this type of back pain is often unknown and medical investigations such as x-rays can reveal no cause. The good news is this type of back pain usually improves within a few days.

Although a specific diagnosis is often difficult to make, a common cause can be a sprain or strain of the muscles or ligaments in the lower back.

Back pain can be further classified into three different types - based on how long the pain lasts.

1. **Acute back pain**
   Lasting less than six weeks.

2. **Sub-acute back pain**
   Lasting six weeks to three months.

3. **Chronic back pain**
   Lasting longer than three months.

A SIGN OF SOMETHING MORE SERIOUS?

Although rare, back pain can be a sign of a more serious condition. If you experience any of the following symptoms with your back pain then please see a doctor urgently.

- Numbness in the groin
- Loss of bladder or bowel control
- Redness or swelling on your back
- Difficulty walking
- Constant pain, especially at night.
- Pain that is getting much worse, or spreading up your spine
- Numbness or pins and needles in both legs.
BACK PAIN FACTS

Most back problems are not due to any serious injury or disease.

Back pain that is a result of poor body mechanics or poor posture is easily treated.

In most cases it is difficult to identify a single cause for back pain. Instead it may be the result of a range of contributing factors.
Back pain is one of the most common reasons for time off work, but research shows that staying at work improves recovery... (you may need to modify some tasks).

Evidence clearly shows that bed rest or being inactive will not help back pain.

To maintain a strong back, or recover from back pain the best advice is to get active and stay active.

Your physiotherapist can advise you on the level of activity that’s right for you.
IS YOUR BACK AT RISK?

The most common type of back pain (nonspecific) often doesn’t have a clear cause.

That said, a number of factors can contribute to your risk of developing back pain, or increasing any pain you may have.

These factors can include:

- Sitting for long periods at a time (without taking a break)
- Poor posture
- Feeling stressed or anxious
- Smoking
- Being pregnant
- Not getting the recommended 30 minutes of exercise a day (on most days)
- Being overweight
- Not knowing how to lift correctly or lifting objects that are too heavy
- Having a trip or fall

Do one or more of the above points apply to you? Then you could be contributing to your back pain.

Consider the following advice in this booklet for ways you can adjust your lifestyle and help prevent back pain.

A physiotherapist can also provide education and a self management plan for you.

www.physiotherapy.org.nz
CHALLENGING BACK PAIN MYTHS

#1

“MOST BACK PAIN IS CAUSED BY SOMETHING BEING OUT OF PLACE.”

This myth has been well publicised with many people believing their back pain is caused by something being out of place: a joint, a disc protruding, mal-alignment of the pelvis or differing leg lengths that all need to be resolved by manipulation to ‘put it back in place’.

In reality most back pain is caused by strains to the ligaments, tendons and muscles that support the joints in the back. Manipulation often provides pain relief and assists with restoring normal joint movement but it does not ‘pop’ something back into place. Consequently regular or on-going manipulation is not required.

#2

“YOU OFTEN NEED SURGERY TO CURE BACK PAIN.”

Very few people require surgery to cure their back pain. In fact with nonspecific low back pain the results of surgery are no better than a physiotherapy rehabilitation programme and there are risks involved with surgery. Less than half of patients experience good outcomes from surgery, with many still experiencing pain, restrictions in function and the need for painkillers.
“BED REST IS OFTEN THE BEST REMEDY FOR BACK PAIN.”

This myth was part of a general health philosophy that taking to your bed when sick or injured was the treatment of choice. It is now known that for most conditions a more active approach is better. People with back pain are encouraged to remain active and (if off work) return to work as soon as possible. In fact extended periods of bed rest can hinder recovery from low back pain. Physiotherapy can assist with designing a graduated programme to help you regain your activity level and return to work.

#3

“YOU OFTEN NEED AN X-RAY OR MRI SCAN TO IDENTIFY WHAT’S CAUSED YOUR BACK PAIN.”

International guidelines do not recommend the routine use of x-ray or MRI for patients presenting with low back pain. This is because x-rays and MRIs may not provide useful information, and can raise patient concern by identifying changes that are harmless. It is recognised the correlation between degenerative changes identified by x-ray and pain is weak.

#4

“ONCE YOU START HAVING BACK PAIN, YOU OFTEN HAVE TO LIVE WITH IT FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE.”

There is always the possibility that back pain can recur. One of the main features of a physiotherapy programme is teaching you how to prevent recurrence and how to cope if you experience any problems.

#5

1NICE (2009) Early management of persistent nonspecific low back pain

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TREATMENT - HOW TO GET BETTER

STAY ACTIVE
It’s important to get back into your usual daily routine as soon as you can. You may need to take it easy at first with tasks like lifting and bending. But it’s great to keep doing some gentle exercise like walking or swimming. Bed rest can make your back pain worse, so get up and about. A physio can advise you on safe, appropriate exercises that will support your back.

Although pain can make you feel like keeping to yourself, it’s important to catch up with friends and continue with your hobbies and interests as much as possible.

GET BACK TO WORK
Getting back to work quickly keeps you involved with others, gets you into a routine and helps you focus on something other than your back pain. If you can’t manage full days at work at first, talk to your employer about easing back into your job. This could involve working part of the days at first, or it could mean that for a time you avoid doing those parts of your job that will make your back feel worse, like heavy lifting.

If your work involves lots of sitting, make sure you get up and stretch regularly. It’s good to do this whether or not you have a sore back!

AVOID BED REST
Research shows that you should avoid bed rest with back pain. Staying active can help reduce your pain and shorten recovery time in most cases. A physio can advise you on the right level of activity for you.

EASE YOUR PAIN
There are over-the-counter medications available to help you manage your back pain so don’t try to ‘tough it out’. Talk to a health professional about what might work best for you.

STAY POSITIVE
Remind yourself that most back pain passes really quickly, and there’s a lot you can do to stop it coming back again - see the next section for ideas on this.

TAKE ACTION IF YOU DON’T GET BETTER
If you’re not feeling better after a few weeks then seek additional treatment. The next section covers how physiotherapy can help you treat and manage your back pain.
HOW PHYSIOTHERAPY CAN HELP

A physiotherapist can identify the factors contributing to your specific back problem and design a treatment plan and management programme just right for you. They’ll also check if any underlying health conditions could be contributing to your back pain. Their aim will be to get you back to full movement and enjoying life again.

Your physio can help with:

- Assessing and advising you about your back pain
- Designing a pain management plan
- Mobilisation and manipulation as appropriate
- Specific strengthening and flexibility exercises
- Exercises to improve your posture
- Education on how to help prevent future back problems
- Advice on returning to work, sport and general activities
- Workstation assessments, ergonomic analysis and advice on specific work tasks
- Referring you to other appropriate health providers (specialists or GPs) if needed.

HOW TO FIND A PHYSIO

Go to www.physiotherapy.org.nz and click on “Find a Physio” to see who’s available in your area.

Check that your physio is a member of Physiotherapy New Zealand. This shows they’re committed to high standards of professional practice. And remember that you don’t need a GP referral to see a physiotherapist.

For an example of how physiotherapy can help treat and manage back pain check out our patient stories on our YouTube channel.
PATIENT STORIES

“MY PHYSIO HELPED MY BACK PAIN WITH TREATMENT ALTERNATIVE TO THE DRUGS MY DOCTORS OFFERED ME, EXERCISES TO DECREASE AND PREVENT MY PAIN AND WAYS I COULD CHANGE MY LIFESTYLE TO HELP ME LONG TERM. SHE EXPLAINED THE MECHANICS OF MY PROBLEM TO ME AND SHOWED A GENUINE CARE INTO MY WELLBEING.

BRITTANY
Physiotherapist: Leanna Veal
Back in Action Physio, Tauranga

“MY PHYSIO HELPED SORT MY LOWER BACK OUT. I HURT IT DURING EXERCISE AT THE GYM BUT ASHLEY HELPED ME WITH MY REHAB AND NOW I HAVE NO PROBLEMS AT ALL AS I NOW FOCUS ON MY TECHNIQUE WHEN DOING DEAD LiftS AND KETTLE BELL SWINGS. HE SHOWED ME HOW TO FOCUS ON TECHNIQUE AND ALSO GAVE ME USEFUL REHAB EXERCISES TO DO AT HOME.

ODESSA
Physiotherapist: Ashley Lake
Milford Physio, North Shore

“MY PHYSIO HELPED ME PLAY MY FAVOURITE SPORT AGAIN. I HAD A LOT OF PAIN IN MY BACK AND IT’S GONE NOW. MIKE WAS VERY INSTRUMENTAL IN FIXING THE PAIN AND TEACHING ME WHAT TO DO TO KEEP IT AWAY FOR GOOD!

NICK
Physiotherapist: Mike Wheeler
Cape Physio, Dunedin.

“I AM A NURSE AND WHEN I HURT MY BACK I WAS WORRIED THAT MY BACK PROBLEM WOULD BECOME PROGRESSIVELY WORSE AND RUIN MY CAREER. I WAS VERY IMPRESSED WITH RYAN’S PROFESSIONAL, CARING APPROACH. HIS TREATMENT HAS SHOWN GREAT RESULTS IN SHORT TIME AND HELPED ME TO STRENGTHEN MY CORE MUSCLES. HE PROVIDED ME WITH VALUABLE EDUCATION AND A PERSONALIZED EXERCISE PLAN THAT HAS ENABLED ME TO FEEL CONFIDENT ABOUT CARRYING ON WITH MY NURSING CAREER WITHOUT FEAR OF REOCCURRING BACK PROBLEMS. I WILL BE RECOMMENDING HIM TO EVERYONE.

AMANDA
Physiotherapist: Ryan Monastra
Back in Action, Carterton
GOOD POSTURE
Think about your posture right now. Are you sitting hunched at a computer and reading this online? Hunched over in a chair? As simple as it sounds, maintaining good posture can make a big difference in keeping your back healthy and avoiding back pain.

Gravity is always trying to pull us down and this combined with bad habits can mean we stand and sit in ways that aren’t good for our back. We might put all our weight on one side, slump over or even lock our knees while standing. When we hold these awkward postures for hours at a time we put additional strain on the back muscles and stress on the spine.

So what does good posture look like? The advice your mother gave you to ‘stand/sit up straight’ is still valid today! A great posture while standing might look like this:

- Straight back - imagine a piece of string is going from your head to the top of the ceiling
- Shoulders back and shoulder blades down
- Chin slightly up

Here’s an easy way to remember:
If you can draw a straight line from your earlobe through your shoulder, hip, knee, to the middle of your ankle—you’ve got it.

WORK TIP!
*Keep your back well aligned when working at your computer or writing. Move forward from the hips rather than slouching from your back.*
LEARNING TO LIFT CORRECTLY
Taking the time to learn the correct lifting and bending techniques is a great way to look after your back, particularly if you’re in a job that involves a lot of heavy lifting. If the object is particularly heavy then ask someone else to help you or reduce the weight and do more lighter lifts.

TAKING REGULAR BREAKS
Your body was not designed to sit all day! So it’s essential to keep moving. If your job involves a lot of sitting in one position then make sure you take regular breaks.

Stand up, have a stretch, walk around or even do a little exercise (how about up and down the stairs).

Try these simple steps:
• Get close to the item you are lifting.
• Lift with your legs, bending your knees and moving forward from your hips.
• Lift gradually and slowly - rather than jerking.
• Pivot with your feet - don’t twist your back while lifting.
• Try to keep the object close to your body at all times.

Tips for office workers!
Move more during your work day:
• Get up and walk to the water cooler.
• Walk over to a colleague rather than sending an email.
• Set a reminder on your calendar to get up and stretch every hour or so.
• If you are making a call on your mobile you can walk around while you talk.
• Active meetings - take your discussions outside for a few minutes’ walk. You could stop for a cup of coffee on the way.
GETTING ACTIVE
One of the most basic things you can do for your back is to get some regular exercise every day. The aim of this exercise (aside from making you feel good) will be to build strong, flexible muscles that will help support your spine and improve your posture.

Of course the benefits of being active don’t stop at your back!

15 Reasons to get active

1. Reduces your anxiety levels
2. Reduces your risk of getting heart disease
3. Improves your circulation
4. Helps reduce the risk of osteoporosis
5. Increases muscle strength
6. Improves balance and coordination
7. Helps to boost creativity
8. Improves your decision making abilities
9. Improves your mood
10. Boosts your immune system
11. Gives you more energy
12. Improves your sleeping patterns / help improve your sleep
13. Reduces your risk of having a stroke
14. Lowers your risk of type 2 diabetes and many cancers
15. Improves your breathing

What type of exercise is best for your back?

Variety is probably the best answer! Consider aerobic exercises like walking, cycling and swimming as well as exercises aimed at improving the strength and mobility of the spine and back. There is no one particular exercise that is better than any other, so the key thing is to choose something you enjoy doing and will continue doing regularly! If you are concerned about choosing the right exercises then have a chat to your local physio about the best type of programme to suit you.
KEEP STRESS TO A MINIMUM

Consider what might put you at risk of developing back pain. Did you immediately think about physical risks such as lifting or straining during a sports game? Stress can be a factor for developing back pain and it can also aggravate pain that you do develop - so it’s important we keep it under control.

1. **Concentrate** - on your breathing. Performing a simple breathing exercise is an easy way to relax - best of all, you can do it at any time of the day! For simple instructions download our relaxed breathing guide from www.physiotherapy.org.nz.

2. **Reach out** - having a good support system is very important for your stress levels. Reaching out and talking to others can lift your mood and help you handle stressful situations better.

3. **Organise** - try to take things one step at a time so you don’t feel overwhelmed. Keeping organised and setting yourself some realistic goals will help you feel more in control.

4. **Take time for you** - if you’re feeling under pressure then try taking time out just for you. Figure out what helps you relax. Exercising can reduce stress, so perhaps a walk with a friend could be helpful.

Go to [www.physiotherapy.org.nz](http://www.physiotherapy.org.nz) and click on “Find a Physio” to see who’s available in your area.

Check that your physio is a member of Physiotherapy New Zealand. This shows they’re committed to high standards of professional practice. And remember that you don’t need a GP referral to see a physiotherapist.
SET UP YOUR WORKSTATION

1. Learn how to adjust the seat back of your office chair. The rounded part (lumbar support) should fit comfortably into the small of your back. This can be lowered or raised. Chairs have varying mechanisms with which to do this. Change the height of your seat back before you change the back angle.

2. When you sit with your back supported you should not feel like you are being pushed forward. If that is the case your seat back is too upright; recline it slightly back. You may want to recline it slightly more if your lower back is sore to ‘unload it’. Not so far that your head and neck have to strain forward but a tiny degree of change can make a big difference to comfort.

3. Feet need to be fully supported either on the floor or by using a footrest.

4. When sitting up tall the top of your monitor should be at, or below, eye level with a slight angle so that the bottom of the screen is closer to you than the top. Use of glasses or lenses may impact on the height and angle with which you need to use your monitor.

5. Limit time on laptops; tablets; pads; mobile devices when you don’t have a docking station or some method to set them up as you would for a PC workstation. Use a separate keyboard and mouse for longer periods of use and either a separate monitor or a stand so that your screen is positioned in line with the guide above.

6. Be mindful how much time you spend outside of the office using mobile technology. You may do everything right at work and then increase back pain by hunching over your tablet at home.

7. Look at where your printer or other office equipment is situated. Where possible create a routine task that makes you get up out of chair. This builds natural breaks into your day.

Be aware that a smaller screen rather than larger may be better for your viewing. Multiple screens can be challenging to good positioning – if one is used more frequently make this your main screen and position yourself in front of this as much as possible.
USEFUL RESOURCES

1. ACC - Guide to Getting Over Back Pain

2. ACC - NZ Acute Low Back Pain Guide

3. Relaxed Breathing Guide, Physiotherapy New Zealand

4. McKenzie Institute of New Zealand
   http://www.mckenziemdt.org.nz/

5. Physiotherapy New Zealand - online find a physiotherapist tool
   www.physiotherapy.org.nz/findaphysio

REFERENCES (PP 10-11)

1. NICE (2009) Early management of persistent nonspecific low back pain


