



**Your back and
how to look after it**

Produced in association with
The United Bristol Healthcare NHS Trust

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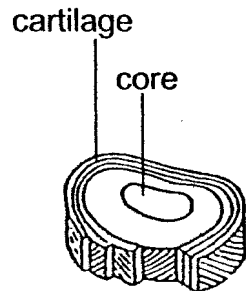
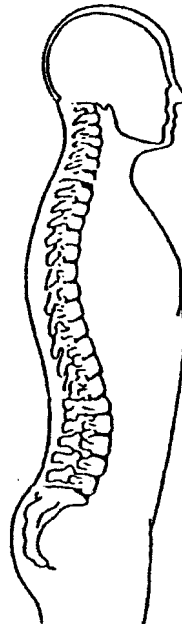
- This leaflet is based on the latest research and aims to help you deal with your back pain and speed up your recovery.

Remember:

- Most people experience some back pain at some time.
- It usually gets better quickly with minimal rest and continued activity.
- Stay active.
- Stay at work or return to work as soon as possible.
- Don't be afraid of the pain - it is unusual for it to indicate serious damage.

Your back

- Your back is strong and stable. The bones or vertebrae are held together by discs and the whole spine is strengthened both front and back by strong ligaments. It is surrounded by powerful muscles which help to protect it. It is surprisingly difficult to damage your back.



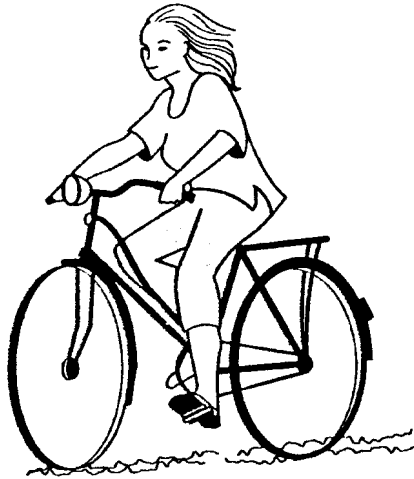
Section through a disc

Remember

- **Back pain is common but is rarely due to any serious disease.**
- **Staying active will help you get better quicker.**
- **Resting in bed for more than a day or two is usually bad for your back.**
- **The sooner you get going, the sooner you will get better!**

What if it happens again?

- If you do get back pain again remember it will go away - it did last time, and just because it comes back it's still not serious!!
- You have a better chance of having a healthy back if you get a bit fitter.
- Walking, cycling and swimming are good for you - being fitter will help you to look after your back.



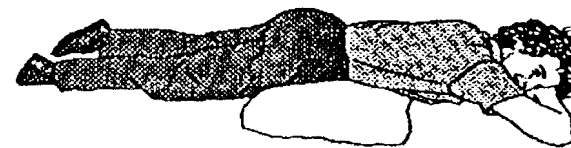
Causes of back pain

- Most people with back pain do not have any damage in their spine and so it is not always possible to pinpoint the exact source of the pain. It is a fact that very few people with back pain have a slipped disc or a trapped nerve.
- Most x-ray findings in your back are normal changes with age - just as we get grey hair at different times as we get older, our backs age at different times too.
- You may find it frustrating not to know exactly what is wrong but this is good news because it means there is nothing serious.

The first 2 to 3 days

- Take painkillers and/or anti-inflammatories as advised by your General Practitioner (GP). These will help to reduce pain and swelling and speed up your recovery.
- **Try to keep moving**, but if you have to rest here are some positions to try:

lie on your back with your hips and knees bent and your legs supported on a stool.



Lie on your front with or without a pillow under your tummy.

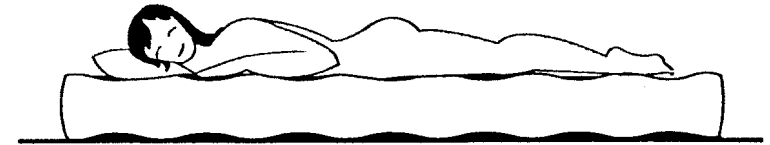


lie on your side with a pillow between your knees and if comfortable, a small pillow or towel under your waist.

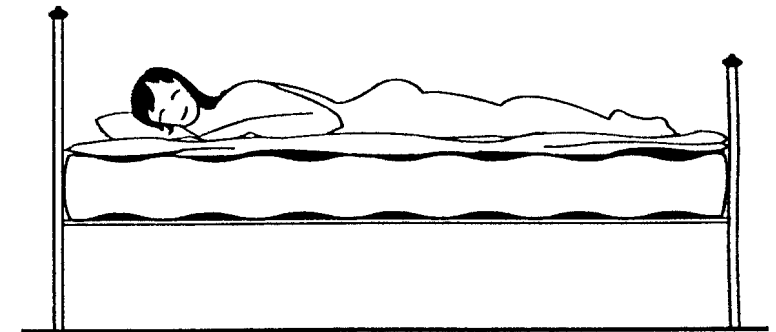
Other things to try:

- **Ice** - try putting a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel on the painful area for 10 minutes.
- **Heat** - ice is usually more effective in an acute condition, but sometimes, to help reduce the pain of muscle spasm, heat can be beneficial. Try using a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel over the painful area for 20 minutes. Make sure that it is not too hot!
- During the first few days it is important to start gentle exercises within the limits of the pain. After the third day gradually increase the exercise.
- You may feel a temporary increase in pain during the exercise but this is normal and does not mean that you are causing harm.
- Exercises such as walking, cycling and swimming can help to ease pain and improve fitness.

Sleeping



- If your bed is too soft put the mattress on the floor or put a piece of hardboard between the mattress and the base.



- If your bed is too hard put a thick duvet or sleeping bag between the mattress and the sheet.

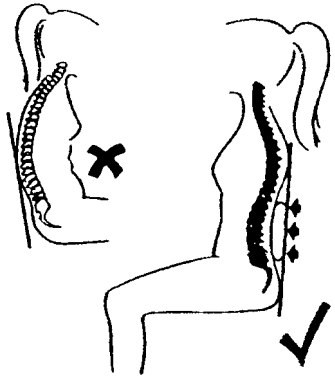
Relax yourself

- Stress, tension and worry can tighten the muscles and cause more pain.
- Try to do things that make you feel calm like going for a walk, listening to music or having a warm bath.



Handy hints

Sitting



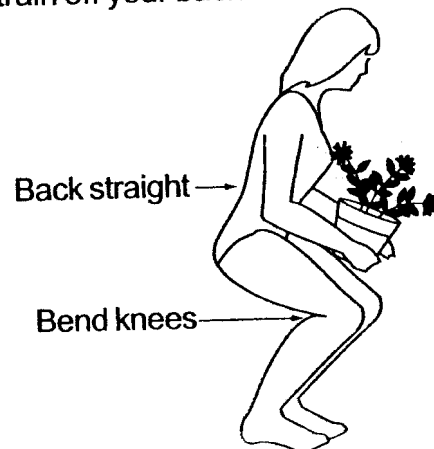
- Choose a chair that supports your lower back to avoid slouching.
- Also a small cushion or rolled up towel in the curve of your lower back may help.
- Don't sit for too long - get up regularly, stretch and walk about.

Driving

- If you are driving for long periods stop regularly and walk about.

Posture

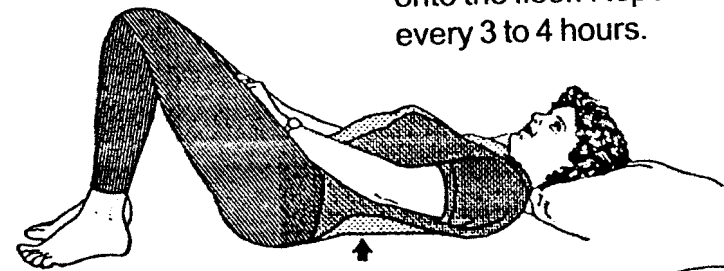
- Try to keep yourself upright and walk around frequently to prevent stiffness.
- When you bend down try to bend your knees to take some of the strain off your back.



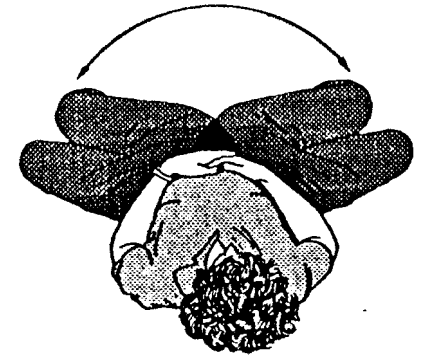
Suggested exercises to do after you have seen your GP

- You may find the following exercises helpful.
- Remember to start gently and build up slowly - it is normal for muscles to ache a little when you start to exercise.
- If an exercise makes you worse, stop doing it, let the pain settle and then start again more gently with fewer of them. If you have any queries discuss them with your physiotherapist.

Flatten the small of your back onto the floor. Repeat 5 times every 3 to 4 hours.



Roll your knees from side to side. Repeat 5 times on each side every 3 to 4 hours.



Exercises to do standing up



With your arms by your side - slide your hand down the side of your leg without bending forward or backwards. Repeat 5 times on each side every 3 to 4 hours.



Put your hands in the small of your back and gently arch backwards. Repeat this 5 times every 3 to 4 hours.



With both arms down by your side turn from left to right. Repeat this 5 times every 3 to 4 hours.

- If your symptoms are not improving within the next seven days you should return to your GP.
- Your GP may decide to refer you to physiotherapy to help you manage your back pain.

Helping yourself after the first few days

- Your doctor or physiotherapist will have made sure there is no serious cause for your back pain.
- As you start to improve you need to follow these simple rules:

Stay active

- Doing light activities will help your back recover . Remember - not using your back does more harm than good.

Pace yourself

- It is normal to have good and bad days. Keep doing your normal activities little and often throughout the day - break down big jobs into smaller, more manageable tasks. This will keep your joints moving and your muscles strong and help speed up your recovery.

Tablets

- Pain killers and anti-inflammatories (prescribed by your doctor) can help you control the pain. Easing the pain helps to make you more comfortable as you gradually get back to your usual activities.

Stay positive

- Expect to get better! Remember - back pain is very common and rarely serious.