

Advice for patients with low back pain discharged from the Emergency Department

Low back problems can cause pain in the back, the buttocks, the legs, or any combination of the three. If it goes to the legs it is called sciatica. It is often made worse by particular movements.

The spine is made up of several bones, called vertebra, stacked on top of each other. Between them are the discs, which have a tough outer casing and a softer interior. Damage to discs may put pressure on a nerve, causing pain and tingling in your legs. Back pain is usually caused by one of 3 things:

- Poor posture
- Strained muscles and ligaments
- Wear and tear of joints

Although it may be extremely painful, very few people with back pain have a serious cause for it.

You may have had an x-ray today – do not worry if you did not, as most back problems are not diagnosed this way.

Bed rest is no longer recommended for back pain. Your back is designed for movement, so the sooner you get back to normal activity the less likely you are to have chronic back problems. That is why we recommend painkillers to allow you to start moving as soon as possible.

It is important that you take regular painkillers to allow you to start moving around properly. Heat from a hot shower or hot water bottle may help. Be careful not to burn yourself though. Do NOT just go to bed; your back will get stiffer.

Avoid sitting for long periods. Try to walk, stand, or lie down. Many patients with sciatica find they cannot sit down for long anyway.

If one of your discs becomes weak, the soft material inside it can push out and press on nerves that go to your leg. This causes sciatica. Over a few weeks, the soft disc material shrinks and so the pressure on the nerve reduces. This means that for most patients who have sciatica the pain will go away. If you have sciatica that is not settling in a few weeks, then your doctor may change your pain medicine or other treatments.

Rarely, some people with back problems or sciatica can develop difficulty with controlling urine or their bowels (incontinence), or weakness of the muscles in the leg. If this happens it is very important to seek medical advice immediately.

After a back injury

- Do not do any heavy lifting, pulling or pushing for a month. Your back is very vulnerable to further injury in this time.
- When sitting, support the small of your back with a small cushion.
- Bend your knees when you lean forward.
- Sleep on whatever is comfortable. This may be a hard bed, but this is not essential. You may be more comfortable sleeping with your knees bent.
- When driving, ensure the small of your back is supported.

Work

Speak with the doctor treating you, or your GP about whether you will be able to do your job. Most people get back to work quickly, although some need a period of time off, or a gradual return to work. This would normally be a discussion you have with your employer and with your GP.

These exercises may help

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent. Flatten your spine to the floor, hold for 4 seconds and then relax. Repeat this 10 times on several occasions through the day.
2. Sit on a stool or chair. Allow your body to sag and then sit up with good posture. Repeat this a few times whenever you sit down and then relax, but do not slouch.
3. Strengthen your leg and stomach muscles to provide more support for your back. Do this by moving from sitting to standing in a relaxed, upright position.

Prevention of future problems

- Avoid being overweight.
- Keep fit. Swimming is often best after a back injury.
- Try to relax. Reduced tension in the muscles reduces pain.
- Learn to lift correctly:
 - Place one foot in front of the other
 - Keep your back straight and upright
 - Bend at the hips and knees
 - Keep arms and the object close to the body
 - Lift by straightening the legs

