Managing low back pain

Information for patients



Serious conditions are very rare

Back pain is very common. Most back pain is linked to minor strains, which can be very painful but will improve over a few days to weeks. Worse pain does not always mean more damage.

Health professionals are trained to check for back conditions that may require special investigations, tests, or referral to a specialist.



Remember that most people don't need scans

Your health professional will arrange tests if they are required. Lower back x-rays and other scans usually do not show the cause of pain. They do not change how your pain is treated and expose you to unnecessary radiation. They can make you worry, causing the pain to stay for longer.



Keep moving – it's the best thing to do

Continue as much of your usual activity as possible, doing a bit more each day. If you are employed, stay at work, or get back to work as soon as possible, even if this is part time or reduced duties. This will help you recover more quickly.

Avoid bed rest. Too much rest slows your recovery. Protecting your back too much by tensing or avoiding movement can make things worse.



Use simple pain relief strategies

For most people, simple pain relief is best. Try heat wraps or heat packs, distraction techniques or relaxed breathing. Sometimes your doctor may recommend over-the-counter pain medications or prescription medications in the short term to help you keep moving while you are recovering. Your doctor will check your progress so you can stop using any medication as soon as possible.

The use of opioids and benzodiazepines can lead to tolerance and dependance and should be avoided.



Follow up with your local health professional

You are best placed to manage your back pain by staying active. Your health professional will provide advice and support and will help make sure you are improving as expected and getting back to normal life.

If you smoke, the evidence shows this may slow your recovery. Follow up with your health professional if you have any questions or require help to give up smoking. Alternatively contact the NSW Quitline on 13 7848 (13 QUIT).



Remind yourself that most people get better with time

For most people, back pain does not mean there is a serious or long-term problem. Be confident your back will get better with time if you stay active and follow the advice you have been given by your health professionals.

By adopting a healthy lifestyle (regular exercise and losing excess weight) you may lower your future risk of low back pain.

If you are employed, ask about the support that may be available to help you recover at work.