

## Back pain in adults

Back pain is very common and can affect 3 in 4 adults. Most bouts ease and are not due to serious back problems. The usual advice in most people is to keep active and continue normal activities as far as possible. Painkillers i.e. anti-inflammatories are usually helpful.

### Self care:

Most cases of low back pain that develop suddenly (acutely) are due to simple low back pain. Many people just 'get on with it' and treat it themselves - and indeed most get better quickly.

### Exercise and keep active:

Try to continue with normal activities as far as possible. If you are on the computer desk or watching TV, remember to get up and walk around every 20mins to prevent your muscles stiffening up.

### Medication:

Simple analgesia is helpful such as paracetamol (two 500mg four times per day) with ibuprofen (400mg three times per day). If you are unable to tolerate ibuprofen tablets then using topical medications such as balsoma or transvasin can help.

If you feel you need stronger medications please call the doctor who may be able to issue a prescription.

Generally if your back pain has not resolved after 4 weeks, it is appropriate to be reviewed by a doctor.

### Seek advice from the Doctor:

As a general guide, if any of the following occur then it may indicate that this is not simple low back pain, and there may be a more serious underlying cause such as a nerve root problem (often referred to as "trapped nerve"), or another disorder. Therefore, tell a doctor if you have any of the following.

- The pain first develops under the age of 20 years or over the age of 55 years.
- Pain travels to the chest, or is higher in the back behind the chest.
- If the pain developed gradually, and slowly gets worse and worse over days or weeks. (Most cases of simple low back pain occur acutely, that is, suddenly.)
- In addition to back pain, you have:
  - Weight loss, fever, or if you feel generally unwell.
  - Recent history of violent trauma or injury to the back.
  - You have or have had a cancer of any part of the body.
  - You have taken steroid tablets for more than a few months.
  - If you have a poor immune system. For example, if you are on chemotherapy or have HIV/AIDS.
- If you are unsure about any symptom.

**Call the Doctor urgently if in addition to back pain you notice these new symptoms:**

- Numbness (lack of feeling) in part or parts of a buttock, around the anus, or in a leg or foot.
- Problems with your bladder or bowels such as not being able to pass urine or loss of control (incontinence)
- Weakness of one or both legs

Evidence suggests that the best way to prevent bouts of low back pain is simply to keep active, and to exercise regularly. This means general fitness exercise such as walking, running, swimming etc. There is no firm evidence to say that any particular 'back strengthening' exercises are more useful than simply keeping fit and active. It is also sensible to be 'back aware'. For example, do not lift objects when you are in an awkward twisting posture.