

# Watling Vale Medical Centre

## ACUTE LOW BACK PAIN

### Physiotherapy Advice Sheet

- Acute low back pain is usually not a serious condition – even if the pain is bad. About 3 in 4 people have bouts of low back pain.
- Most people recover quickly – often within a week or so.
- Nerve root pains and ‘slipped discs’ are uncommon – and most of these get better by themselves anyway. More serious causes of back pain are even more uncommon. Surgery is only rarely needed.
- Stay as active as possible and return to normal activities as soon as possible, including work. People with back pain who get active, and back to normal activities as soon as possible (including work) are likely to recover more quickly and are less likely to develop chronic (persistent) back pain compared to those who rest and do little exercise.
- If the pain is very bad to start with you may need to rest in bed for a day or so – but get active as soon as possible. Bed rest does not promote recovery. You need to get your muscles going again rather than let them stiffen up by resting.
- You may have to put up with some pain whilst getting back to normal activities. With simple low back pain you will not do any ‘damage’ if you do normal activities or get back to work. On the contrary, you are less likely to develop long term problems.
- Painkillers taken regularly will ease pain whilst you are getting back to normal activities.
- See a doctor if the pain gets worse, or persists more than 4-6 weeks, or if you develop any worrying symptoms.

### Medication

If you need painkillers, it is best to take them regularly. This is better than taking them ‘now and again’ just when the pain is very bad. If you take them regularly the pain is more likely to be eased for much of the time and enable you to exercise and keep active.

- **Paracetamol** is often sufficient if you take it regularly at full strength. For an adult, this is 1000mg (usually two 500mg tablets), four times a day.
- **Anti-inflammatory painkillers.** Some people find that these work better than paracetamol. They include ibuprofen which you can buy at pharmacies or get on prescription. Other types such as Diclofenac or Naproxen need a prescription. Some people with asthma, high blood pressure, kidney failure, or heart failure may not be able to take anti-inflammatories.
- **A stronger painkiller** such as codeine is an option if anti-inflammatories do not suit or do not work well. Codeine is often taken in addition to paracetamol. Constipation is a common side-effect from codeine. This may make back pain worse if you need to strain to go to the toilet. To prevent constipation, have lots to drink and eat foods with plenty of fibre.

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#### Self-Help Measures

##### Ice or Heat?

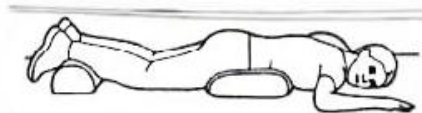
For the first 48 hours you should use ice (a packet of frozen peas will do!). Make sure you don't apply directly to your skin, wrap the bag in a damp towel first and place on your back for 10 minutes, no longer, you can do this up to every 2 hours.

After 48 hours you can use heat (a hot water bottle), again protect your skin with a towel and place on your back for 10 minutes, this can be repeated as often as every 2 hours if you wish.

Be as active as your pain will allow. Adopt positions which reduce your pain. Make sure you get up and change positions regularly e.g. take short walks and avoid sitting or lying down for long periods, i.e. > 20 minutes and keep good posture.

Pain medication (pain killers and/or anti-inflammatories) as prescribed or advised by your doctor or pharmacist may help relieve pain.

Below are some positions that may give some relief:



Lying down with a pillow under your stomach



Lying on your back with your knees bent



Lying in the recovery position



Lying on your back with your head supported and your legs resting on a chair.

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#### **Exercises**

You can start these exercises after 24 hours.

They should either make your back pain feel better or the same, if they make the pain worse then **STOP**.

Start by just doing three repetitions and gradually increase to ten repetitions over seven days.

Try and do the exercises three times a day.

Lying on your back with your knees together and bent. Draw your belly button up and in, thinking of your deep tummy muscles below your belly button and trying to make them firm. Try not to bulge your stomach and remember to breathe. Hold for 10 seconds and relax.

Lying on your back with your knees bent place your hand in the small of your back. Roll your pelvis backwards to flatten your back onto your hand and then roll it forwards to arch away from your hand.

Lying on your back with your knees together and bent slowly roll your knees from side to side, keeping your upper trunk still.

Lying face down with a cushion under your stomach relax for a while in this position.

Stand with your legs straight, swing one leg forward, keeping your knee straight, then swing the same distance backwards. Repeat with the other leg.

Stand with your arms relaxed at your side, swing one arm forwards and then bring back down to your side. Repeat with the other arm, swinging arms alternatively.