



DynamicHealth



How to help your mid back pain



Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust: delivering excellence in musculo-skeletal services and pelvic health physiotherapy across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough

This guidance has been produced by the Dynamic Health physiotherapy service. It offers simple measures to help you manage your mid back pain problem safely; often the right advice and exercises are all you need to improve the problem. This leaflet has been made available to your GP, who may ask you to try the advice and exercises prior to consulting a physiotherapist.

Mid back pain (Thoracic)

Your thoracic spine is the middle section of your spine. It starts at the base of your neck and ends at the bottom of your ribs. The thoracic spine is designed to be strong and stable to allow us to stand upright and to protect the vital internal organs in the chest. As this area is very stable, it is less prone to the injuries experienced by the neck and low back, but it is susceptible to pain, particularly when this area becomes stiff.



Pain is often felt when sitting, when twisting the body or can feel like restriction when taking a deep breath. This is usually when the spine is stiff.

What you can do to help

Avoid staying in one position for long periods of time and keep active throughout the day.

Look at your work position and try seated (desk-based) exercises during the workday.

Adopt good posture throughout the day's activities.

Regularly carry out **seated or movement exercises** to reduce stiffness.

To maintain a healthy spine and prevent reoccurrences, progress to **strengthening exercises**.

When to seek medical attention

It is rare that spinal pain is actually an indication of a more serious underlying medical issue (<1%). However, an in-depth assessment by a health care professional (A&E/GP/physiotherapist) is recommended if:

- Your mid back pain started suddenly following significant trauma (such as a vehicle accident or fall from a height).

- You felt/feel unwell with the spinal pain (such as fever, chills, unexplained weight loss or have had a recent bacterial infection).
- You have a medical history of osteoporosis, cancer, HIV, drug abuse, have an immunosuppressive condition or are on long term steroid medication.

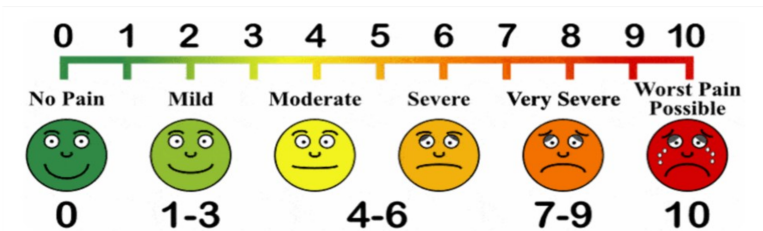
If your mid back pain is progressively getting worse, is not relieved by lying down and is keeping you constantly awake throughout the night, despite trying the advice and exercises within this leaflet for 1-2 weeks or indeed if the exercises are making your pain significantly worse. Then please seek further advice from your GP.

Exercises

You may find that these exercises slightly increase your symptoms initially. You should find that with practice, the exercises themselves become easier to do and that you begin to move more comfortably.

How much pain is too much?

- **Before exercising, rate your pain** at that moment on a scale of 0–10, where 0 is no pain and 10 is the worst pain you can imagine.
- **A maximum pain level of 4/10 while exercising is fine**, as long as this eases within 45 minutes of the session and does not interfere with sleep or activities the next day.
- **If your pain increases beyond this, simplify the exercises** by reducing the range of movement, number of repetitions or try an easier exercise.



Seated (desk-based) exercises

Throughout the working day, aim to complete some exercises every 1-2 hours. **Perform** each exercise until you feel that some of the stiffness has reduced.



Seated upper back stretch – Sitting on a chair, gently straighten your spine. Then push your hands forwards and allow your upper back and neck to round. You should feel a stretch in your upper back, continue to breath evenly throughout the exercise.



Seated side flexion – sit sideways on a chair with a cushion between your side and the back of the chair. Place your hands behind your neck (or cross them over your chest). Bend to the side, you should feel a stretch on the opposite side.



Seated extension – start sitting on a chair, hold a stick/broom/golf club with a wide grip. Lift the stick up as high as possible with your arms straight in front of you, extending your upper back at the same time.



Seated rotation – start sitting on a chair with your legs hip width apart and feet flat on the floor. Place your hands behind your neck with your elbows pointing to the side. Aim to keep your spine elongated as you rotate your torso to each side. Ensure you keep your shoulders down.

Movement exercises

Choose 3 or 4 exercises from the set below that are challenging but manageable. Gradually build your range of movement. **Perform** each exercise until you feel that some of the stiffness has reduced.



Thoracic spine extension – stand comfortably and lean your trunk forwards with your arms outstretched. You can also complete this exercise in sitting by leaning your trunk forwards and resting your outstretched arms on a table. Gently let your trunk drop down, you should feel a stretch in your chest muscles and down your sides.

Movement exercises



Cat camel – start on your hands and knees, ensure knees under hips and hands under shoulders. Start with your back in a neutral position. Then round your back as far as you feel comfortable, hold the position for a moment, then return to the starting position.



Quadruped rotation – start on your hands and knees, ensure knees under hips and hands under shoulders. Place one hand behind your head. Rotate your upper back and move your elbow towards the ceiling. Return to the starting position and repeat to the other side. Focus on rotating your spine rather than just moving your arm.



Wall rotations – start next to a wall in a half kneeling position (use a pillow underneath your knee if required), with your raised leg against the wall. Your foot should be flat on the floor and hip bent to 90 degrees. The arm closest to the wall shoulder be raised to shoulder level, with the other arm next to it. Twist your upper back and move your outer arm as far as you can. The arm against the wall should not move. Ensure that your head follows the outer arm as it moves round and then return to the starting position. Aim to keep your pelvis facing forwards. Repeat on both sides.



Extension – for this exercise you can use a foam roller or roll a few towels together. Start lying on your back with both knees bend and feet flat on the floor. Position the roller horizontally behind your mid back. Place both hands at the back of your head. Then let your shoulders and head slowly bend backwards. Return to the starting position and repeat. Aim to move the spine vertebrae-by-vertebrae when moving up and down. Keep your chin tucked in and try not to let your lower back arch.



Open book – start side lying with knees bent. Place both your hands together and extend your arms in front of you. Reach your top arm only towards the ceiling, then open your chest as you take the arm to the other side. Let your head follow your moving arm throughout the exercise. Slowly return to the starting position and repeat. Complete on both sides.

Strengthening exercises

Complete these exercises every other day to allow enough rest for the soft tissues to recover and develop.

Choose 3 or 4 exercises from the set below that are challenging but manageable.

Perform 3-5 sets of 5 repetitions of each exercise.

Rest for up to 1-2 minutes between each set.

Once an exercise is easy, progress it by increasing the number of repetitions (aim for 10) or by holding the position for longer, or moving to a more challenging exercise.



Extension – start on your knees with your arms outstretched on a gym ball. Push your pelvis back towards your heels and roll the ball forwards with straight arms. Press your chest towards the floor and straighten your upper back. Return to the starting position.



Wall squat – stand tall, facing a wall. Feet slightly wider than hip-width apart, toes point slightly outward. Arms lifted, elbows straight and hands against the wall. Squat down keeping your trunk upright and weight in your heels. Go as low as you can, while still controlling the neutral position of your spine. Aim to keep your hips, knees and 2nd toes aligned. Start further away from the wall and move closer to progressively make it more difficult.



W lift – start lying on your stomach. Take your arms out to the side with your elbows at right angles. Lengthen and align your body through your toes to the top of your head. Maintain with width of your chest and back. Lift your arms up and feel your shoulder blades move towards your spine. In a controlled manner, lower your arms back to the starting position. To make this harder, you can hold a light weight in your hands.



Y lift – start lying on your stomach, with your arms diagonally above your head. Lengthen and align your body through your toes to top of your head. Maintain the width of your chest and back. Lift your arms up and feel your shoulder blades move towards your spine. In a controlled manner, lower your arms back to the starting position. To make this harder, you can hold a light weight in your hands.

Strengthening exercises



Bird dog – start kneeling on your hands and knees, ensure your hands are under your shoulders and knees under hips. Your spine should be in a neutral position. Lift one arm and opposite leg. Lift only as high as you can control the position of your spine. Aim to limit the amount of sideways weight shift.



Woodchop – stand tall and hold a weight plate with both hands. Squat down, rotate from your trunk and bring the weight plate to one side, next to your thigh. Maintain a neutral position with your spine and keep your chest up. Then push back up, shift your weight to the opposite side leg, rotate from your hips and pelvis, while bringing the weight plate diagonally over your head with straight arms. Slowly return to the starting position with control. Repeat in the other direction.

Lifestyle and Wellbeing Support Services

<https://haycambspboro.co.uk/>

<https://healthyyou.org.uk/>

Speaking to the social prescriber at your GP practice can also be a very useful resource.

Useful Information Sources

Royal Osteoporosis Society - Exercise and physical activity website link:
<https://theros.org.uk/information-and-support/osteoporosis/living-with-osteoporosis/exercise-and-physical-activity-for-osteoporosis/>

For further information about this service contact:

General Enquiries: 0300 555 0123

Physiotherapy Dept, Hinchingsbrooke Hospital, Hinchingsbrooke Park, Huntingdon, Cambs PE29 6NT

Physiotherapy Dept, Brookfields Campus, 351 Mill Road, Cambridge, CB1 3DF

Physiotherapy Dept, Princess of Wales Hospital, Lynn Road, Ely, Cambs, CB6 1DN

Physiotherapy Dept, Doddington Hospital, Benwick Road, Doddington, Cambs, PE15 0UG

Physiotherapy Dept, Rowan Lodge, North Cambs Hospital, The Park, Wisbech, Cambs, PE13 3AB

Physiotherapy Dept, City Care Centre, Thorpe Road, Peterborough, PE3 6DB

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