



DynamicHealth



How to help your lower 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 DynamicHealth physiotherapy service. It offers simple measures to help you manage your lower back 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.

When to seek medical attention

It is rare that spinal pain is actually an indication of a more serious underlying medical issue. However, if your back pain is associated with any of the following please seek an urgent GP appointment or attend A&E.

- Your 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 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.

Cauda equina syndrome

Cauda Equina Syndrome is a rare and very serious condition where the nerves at the very bottom of the spinal cord become compressed. If left untreated it can cause permanent damage. It is reported that only one in 10,000 to 20,000 patients with back pain will develop cauda equina syndrome.

However, if you notice any of the following symptoms then you may be suffering from Cauda Equina Syndrome:

- Loss of feeling/ pins and needles between your inner thighs or genitals
- Numbness in or around your back passage or buttocks
- Altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- Increasing difficulty when you try to urinate
- Increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of urine
- Loss of sensation when you pass urine
- Leaking urine or recent need to use pads

- Not knowing when your bladder is either full or empty
- Inability to stop a bowel movement or leaking
- Loss of sensation when you pass a bowel motion
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Loss of sensation in genitals during sexual intercourse

If you have any of the above symptoms you should attend your nearest A&E IMMEDIATELY to prevent any long term damage or disability. The above information is available in multiple languages at:

<http://www.eoemskservice.nhs.uk/advice-and-leaflets/lower-back/cauda-equina>

About the lower back

The lower back, also referred to as the lumbar spine/region, is where most back pain occurs and includes the five vertebrae (referred to as L1-L5) in the lumbar region, which supports much of the weight of the upper body. The spaces between the vertebrae are maintained by round, rubbery pads called intervertebral discs that act like shock absorbers throughout the spinal column to cushion the bones as the body moves. Bands of tissue known as ligaments hold the vertebrae in place, and tendons attach the muscles to the spinal column.



Causes of lower back pain

Back pain is very common and usually improves within a 6-12 weeks. In most cases, the pain is not caused by anything serious and will get better over time. It's not always possible to identify the cause of back pain. Most back pain is what's known as "non-specific" (there's no obvious cause) or "mechanical" (the pain originates from the joints, bones or soft tissues in and around the spine).

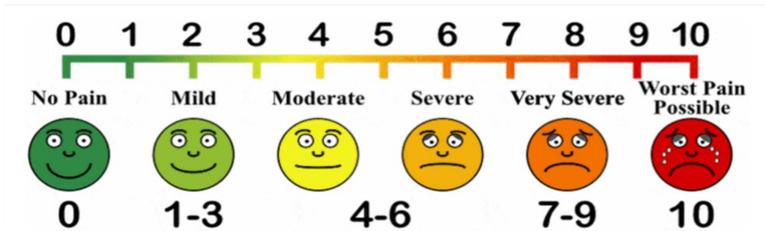
Lower back exercises

How much should I do?

- **Exercise every other day** – allowing enough rest is important to let the soft tissues 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 for holding the positions for longer, or moving to a more challenging exercise.

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 exercise** by reducing the range of movement or number of repetitions, or try an easier exercise.



Range of movement exercises



Posterior pelvic tilt

Lie on your back wherever you are most comfortable, this could be on your bed. Try to suck in your belly button and clench your buttocks. Imagine you have a tail you are trying to tuck between your legs. Doing this should mean you perform a pelvic tilt. You will find that your lower back flattens to the floor/bed as a result.



Posterior pelvic tilt in standing

Stand up tall, with your feet hip-width apart and arms supported on your hips. Try to suck in your belly button and clench your buttocks. Imagine you have a tail you are trying to tuck between your legs. Doing this should mean you perform a pelvic tilt.



Knee rolls

Lie on your back with knees bent, and positioned together. Keep your upper back and shoulders down. Whilst keeping your knees together gently move them side to side. Only go as far as you feel comfortable to start, without moving your shoulders.



Knee hugs

Lay on your back with your knees bent and feet flat. Lay wherever you are most comfortable whether it be on your bed or on the floor. Place your hands behind your knee and gently pull your knee towards your chest, only pull as far as you feel comfortable. Hold between 5-30 seconds, again as you feel comfortable.



Cat and camel

On your hands and knees, hands under your shoulders and knees under your hips. Do this wherever you are most comfortable whether it be on your bed or on the floor. Try to arch and round your back up and down in a slow and controlled manner, by trying to tilt your pelvis backwards and forwards.



Trunk rotation

On your hands and knees. Hands under your shoulders and knees under your hips. Do this wherever you are most comfortable whether it be on your bed or on the floor. Reach one arm under the other armpit and reach as far as you can. Then bring the arm back and reach up towards the ceiling.

Strength exercises



Bridge

Lie on your back, wherever you are most comfortable whether it be on your bed or on the floor. Bend your knees up, and place them hip-width apart and your feet flat. Suck in your belly button and clench your buttocks, trying to perform and hold the pelvic tilt, which is shown and described in the very first exercise.



Sit to stand

Choose a good steady chair. Sit on the chair with your feet and knees hip-width apart and feet flat on the floor. Aim to keep your knees and feet pointing forwards. Stand up purposefully pushing through your heels, to stand up tall. Sit back down in a steady and controlled manner, leading with your hips. Throughout the exercise try to keep looking forwards.



Standing hip abduction

Stand up tall with your back against a wall and hold onto a support as you need to. Lift your leg sideways, keeping your leg against the wall and leading the movement with your heel. Then back to the start position. Keep your upper body straight throughout the exercise.



Cat dog/superman

On your hands and knees. Hands under your shoulders and knees under your hips. Do this wherever you are most comfortable whether it be on your bed or on the floor. Suck in your belly button. Lift one arm and the opposite leg in a slow controlled manner. Lift only as high as you can maintain your back position and pelvis level. Bring the arm and leg back down to the floor and repeat on the opposite sides. It may be advisable to try lifting just one arm/leg at a time before you lift your arm and leg at the same time to test your balance and control.



Straight leg deadlift

Stand tall with your feet hip-width apart. Hold a stick close to the top of your thighs and hands positioned just wider than shoulder-width apart. With almost straight knees, tilt your upper body forwards and push your hips gently backwards until you feel a stretch in the back of your thighs. Straighten back to the starting position and repeat. Keep your shoulder blades squeezed together to help maintain a straight back and keep the stick close to your legs throughout.

Top tips

- Keep active and don't stay in the same position for long periods (i.e. sitting, lying, standing) – research shows that bed rest for more than a couple of days can make the pain worse as it weakens muscles and you become more unfit.
- Exercise regularly and pace yourself — start off slowly and gradually increase. Your back will become stronger and more flexible, reducing pain.
- Take pain relief medication or use creams/gels on the affected area — if you have other medical conditions or are taking other medication, please discuss this with your local pharmacist or GP.
- Apply a heat or ice pack to ease pain and stiffness — ensure you protect your skin to avoid burns or irritation.
- Try to relax as this will reduce muscle tension. Tips on how to do this are provided in this booklet.
- Try and build your exercises into your everyday activities.
- You don't have to do all the exercises in one go.
- If one particular movement is painful, use this each week to evaluate your progress.
- It is normal for it to take 6-12 weeks before you see a good improvement in your pain, movement and strength.
- Don't stop moving your lower back – muscles need movement to keep them healthy.
- If your sleep is poor, try using a pillow for support i.e. if you like lying on your side, place a pillow under your waist and under your knees. If you like laying on your back, place a pillow under your thighs. If you like laying on your front, place a pillow under the front of your hips/stomach.
- General exercise can really help your recovery so try to keep going with other activities you enjoy to keep fit. Even a brisk walk could really help.

Lifestyle and Wellbeing Support Services

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

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

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

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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For free, confidential health advice and information 24 hours a day, 365 days a year please contact NHS 111.

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