

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 dependence 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.

Seek urgent care from your local health professional if:

- ✓ You become unable to pass urine or lose bowel control
- ✓ You notice changes in feeling in the 'saddle' region (your bottom, genitals and between your legs)
- ✓ Your symptoms get a lot worse, despite treatment.

In an emergency, attend your local emergency department or call 000.

In non-emergency situations, contact your usual health professional.

Back pain recovery plan

FOR (PATIENT NAME)	DATE

HOW WILL I STAY ACTIVE?

Try not to lie or sit for a long time (unless sleeping).

Change position at least every 30 minutes when awake (e.g. sit, then walk, lie on a bed, walk again).

Try to do your normal activities as much as you can.

Set goals to do a little bit more activity or plan to walk each day. Take breaks if needed.

Start with walking for

Walking is an easy and safe way to keep moving.

Use other pain management strategies.

Heat packs, heat wraps or relaxed breathing may help you to keep up your normal activities.

Use work as part of your recovery.

Talk with your employer about what you can do at work to help you keep active and recover. Also talk to your doctor about what you can do at work.

Address any concerns you have about staying active.

[View this guide](#) and then talk to your health professional if you still have any concerns.

Other

WHAT ELSE CAN HELP ME KEEP MOVING?

Medications can help you remain active. Your doctor may prescribe stronger medicines for the first few days. They will advise you when to stop using these, with regular reviews, providing a safe medication plan during recovery.

Medication name	Dosage (how much)	How often (e.g. twice daily, before activity)	When to stop

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS FOR ME?

Should I see a health professional, and when?

Review with	Contact details
When	

Contact your health professional if your condition worsens.

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