

The Back Care Book

A guide to keeping your back healthy



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Introduction

Most people, around 80%, will have back pain at some stage during their lives. Usually, the best way to deal with back pain is to stay active. This booklet gives you general information on the possible causes of back pain, how to manage it and how to prevent it from happening again.

If you have back pain, you should talk to your GP or a qualified health professional, such as a chartered physiotherapist.





What causes back pain?

Back pain may happen for a number of reasons. Your back is very strongly built. It is made up of a column of bones called vertebrae. At the top of this column is the skull and at the bottom is the pelvis. Between each bone is a disc, which has a jelly-like centre and is surrounded by thick cartilage. Strong ligaments and muscles hold it all together and help make your back move.

Most back pain is caused by muscle, ligament or joint sprain. This can cause discomfort and stiffness. Other reasons for back pain include:

- a slipped disc or a trapped nerve,
- arthritis caused by wear and tear,
- osteoporosis,
- stress, or
- pregnancy.

Occasionally, back pain may be a sign of another illness. You must talk to your GP if you experience back pain **and any** of the following:

- difficulty passing or controlling urine,
- numbness in the genital or back passage area,
- numbness, pins and needles or weakness in both legs, or
- unsteadiness on your feet.

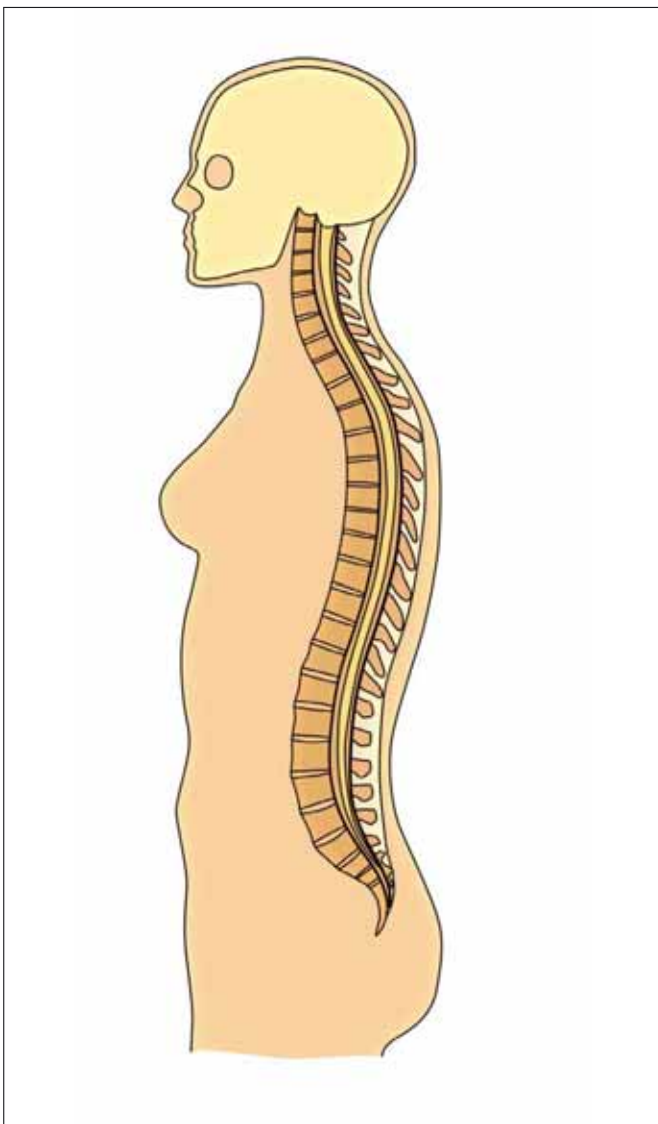
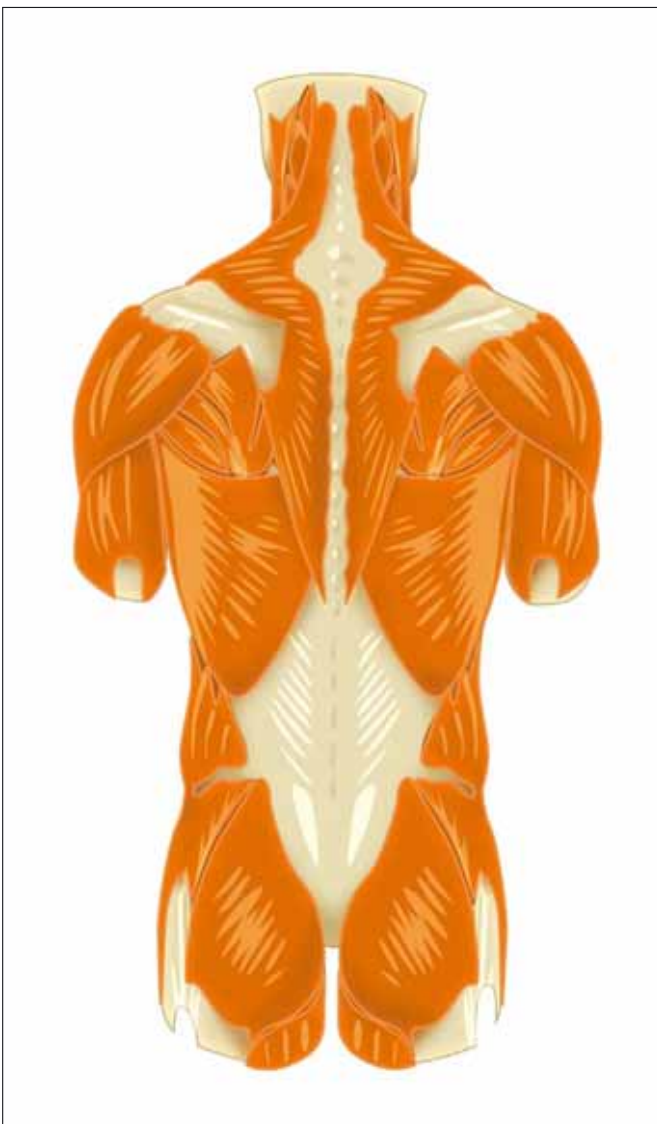


Diagram of the spine



The muscles that support the back

Muscle, ligament or joint sprain

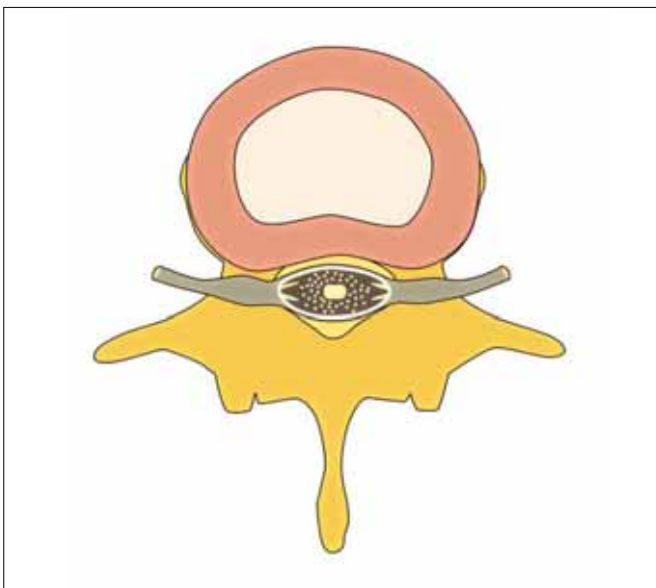
Poor posture, such as sitting in a slouched position, can overstretch ligaments or muscles in your back. Muscles are easily strained if you do not warm up before taking exercise or if you exercise when your muscles are tired.

Regular physical activity helps keep your muscles, ligaments and joints strong and flexible, preventing this type of back pain.

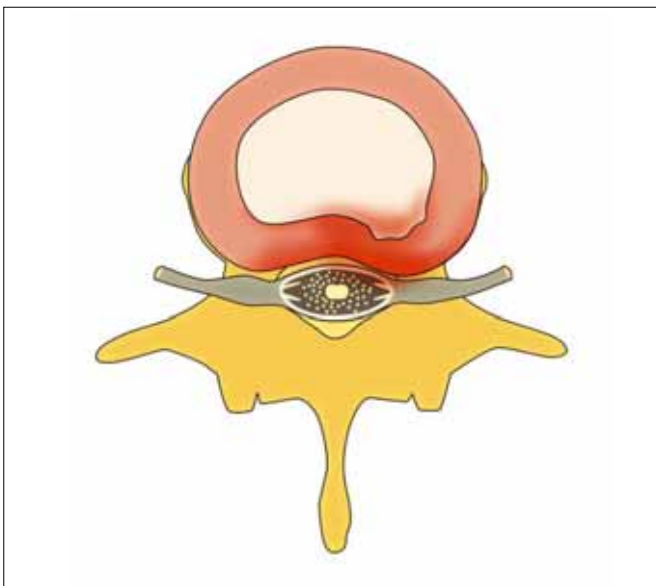
If you have muscle, ligament or joint sprain, it is usually best to keep active. This will encourage your back's natural ability to recover and work properly again.

Slipped disc or trapped nerve

A slipped (prolapsed or herniated) disc is caused when the jelly-like centre of the disc bulges out. This may press on a nerve, so trapping it and causing pain. A slipped disc pressing on the sciatic nerve causes sciatica, which can be felt as pain down your leg. If you think you have a slipped disc, talk to your GP or a qualified health professional.



Healthy disc



Slipped disc

Arthritis

Arthritis means stiffness and inflammation of the joints. It can be caused by 'wear and tear' at the bone ends. This is called osteoarthritis. This wear and tear happens naturally as you get older. Back pain can be caused by wear and tear at the joints in your spine.

To reduce this wear and tear:

- keep active and do exercises to keep your back strong and flexible, and
- stay a healthy weight – extra weight puts strain on your back muscles and joints.

For more information on arthritis, contact Arthritis Ireland. You will find their contact details at the back of this booklet.

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis, or 'thinning of the bones', happens when calcium is lost from your bones faster than you can replace it. As well as causing back pain, osteoporosis increases your risk of a fracture (broken bone).

To reduce your risk of osteoporosis:

- eat foods rich in calcium, such as milk and cheese, every day (low-fat dairy products have as much calcium in them as full-fat products);
- take regular, weight-bearing physical exercise, such as walking, gentle jogging, tennis or aerobics; and
- stop smoking.

For more information on osteoporosis, contact the Irish Osteoporosis Society. You will find its contact details at the back of this booklet.



Stress

When you are worried or anxious, your muscles become tense. This can cause back pain or, if you already suffer from back pain, can make it worse.

To reduce your risk of stress-related back pain:

- learn to recognise stress in your life, and
- find ways that help you relax and manage stress.

Physical activity is a good way of releasing tension and stress.



Back pain and pregnancy

Hormone changes during pregnancy cause the ligaments around your pelvis to loosen. During and after pregnancy you need to be careful not to put strain on your back. Take care to lift the correct way and maintain a good posture (see page 18).

You can enjoy the benefits of physical activity such as walking, swimming or gentle yoga during pregnancy. If you had back pain before you became pregnant, talk to your GP before starting any new physical activity.

Children and back pain

Many children have back pain, but it is usually not a serious problem. Sitting for too long can cause back pain. Carrying school bags and other heavy objects incorrectly causes poor posture in children, and may also cause back pain.

- Make sure your child takes breaks from sitting.
- Encourage your child to be active. Children need to be active for at least 1 hour every day.
- Teach your child to lift the correct way (see page 18).
- Check that your child is carrying their schoolbag the correct way.
- Check what is in your child's schoolbag. Does your child have to carry all the books to and from school every day?

If your child continues to complain of back pain, talk to your GP.

How can I take care of my back?

There are a number of things you can do to take care of your back and prevent back pain.

Be active

Regular physical activity will help keep your back strong and flexible. Aim for 30 minutes a day of moderate intensity physical activity, most days of the week. Moderate intensity physical activity is when you raise your heartbeat, sweat lightly and can still carry on a conversation. Children need to be active for at least 1 hour every day.

You can break the 30 minutes into shorter sessions to suit your lifestyle. For example:

5 minute walk to work
+ 20 minute swim at lunch
+ 5 minute walk home
<hr/>
= 30 minutes

Walking, swimming, gentle jogging, yoga and cycling are some physical activities you might enjoy. Build physical activity into your everyday life. For example, use the stairs instead of the lift.

Specific exercises that strengthen your abdominal (stomach) and back muscles can help prevent back pain.



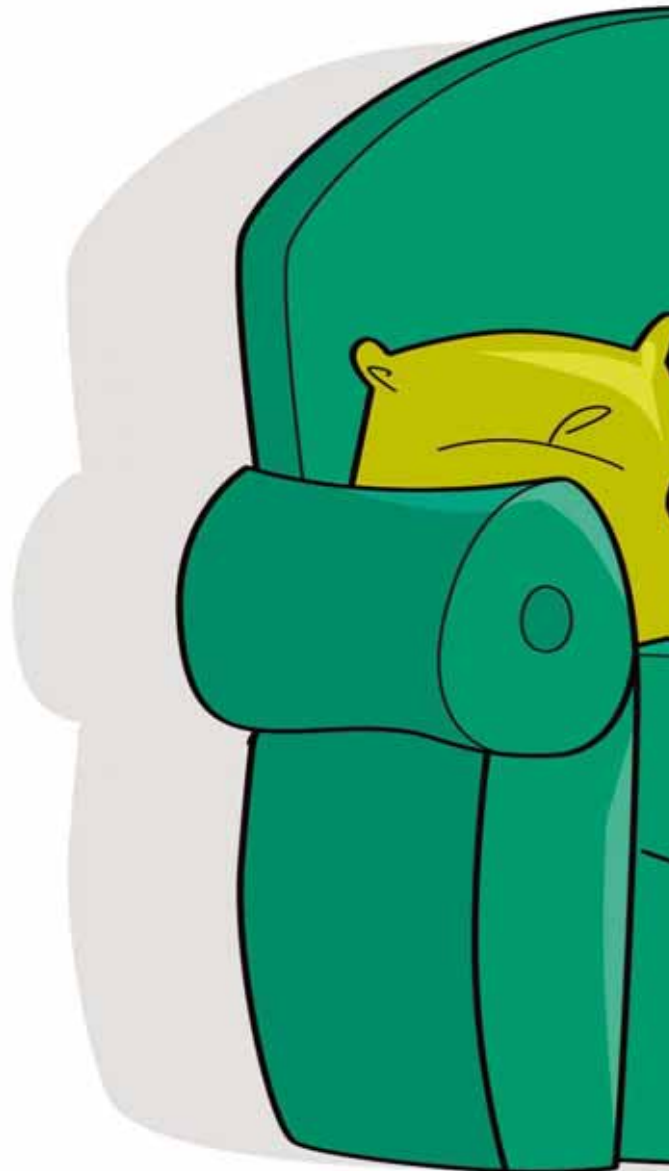


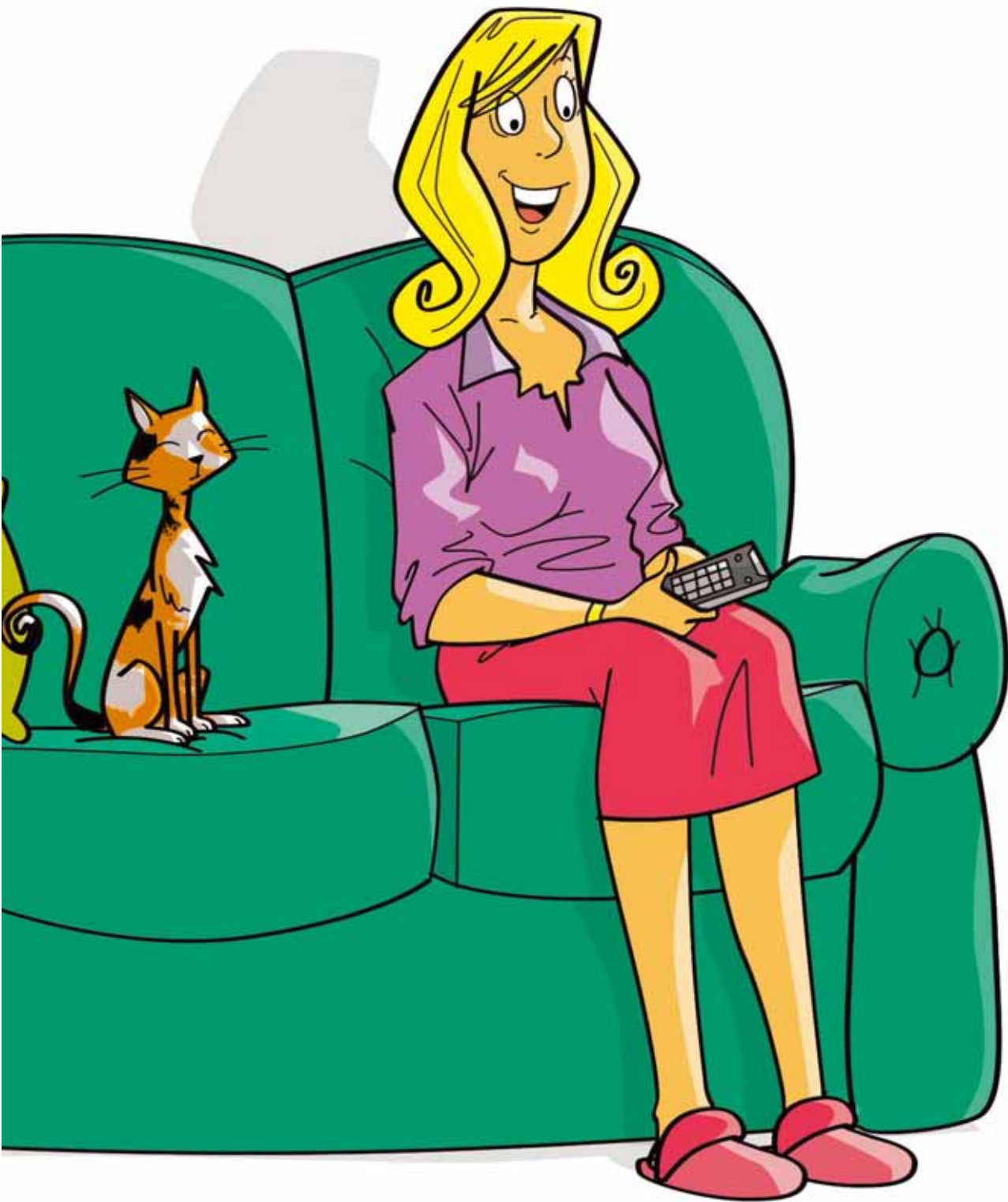
Maintain a good posture

Poor posture can strain ligaments in your back. Learning and practising good posture can help prevent back pain.

Sitting

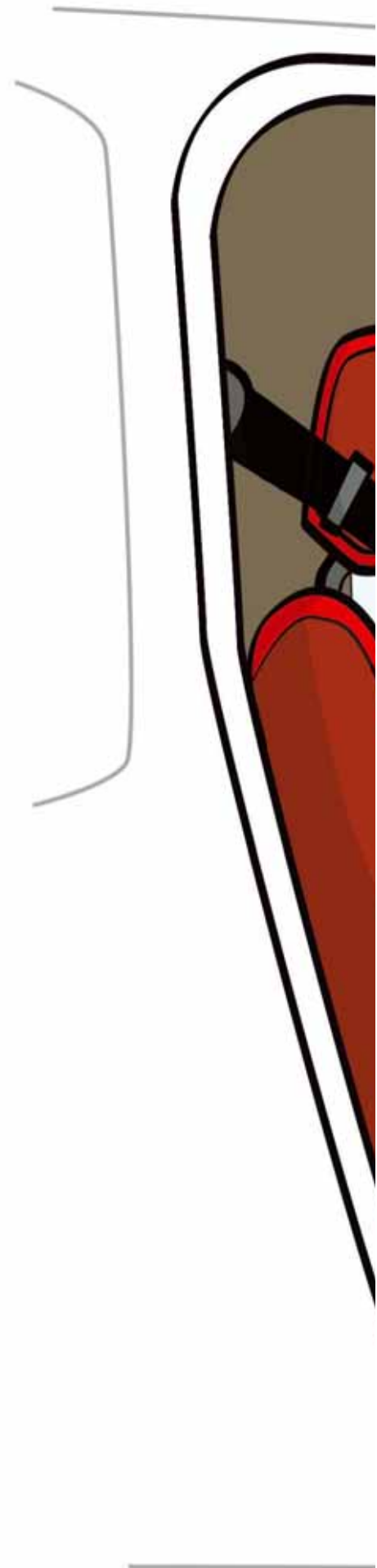
- Sit well back into the chair. It should support your lower back.
- Do not sit for long periods, whether you are at home in the armchair, in the office, in school or driving.
- Your feet should be flat on the floor. If your feet do not reach the floor, adjust the height of the chair or use a footrest.





Driving

- Sit a comfortable distance from the foot pedals and steering wheel.
- Sit well back into the car seat. It should support your lower back.
- If the back of the seat does not support you properly, use a small cushion or folded towel at the small of your back.
- If you are driving a long distance, take regular breaks to walk and stretch.





At work

- Try to arrange your work so that you get a balance of sitting and moving around. If you sit at a desk all day, stand up and stretch regularly.
- If your job involves manual handling, use appropriate mechanical aids and safe lifting techniques.
- If you sit at a desk, make sure you have plenty of leg room under the desk. Arrange your desk space so that the things you use often are close to hand.
- When using a computer, make sure the screen is directly in front of you. Use a document holder when working from documents.
- Do not prop the telephone between your neck and shoulder. Use a headset instead.
- Take your tea or coffee breaks and lunch breaks away from your desk.
- Ask for advice and an assessment of your workstation or workplace.

For more information on back care in specific workplaces, contact the Health and Safety Authority. You will find its contact details at the back of this booklet.



Lift the correct way.

Before you lift you should think about and plan how you are going to lift. Here are the basic rules for safely lifting any object, heavy or light.

- Lift only what you are able to lift safely.
- Get help if you need it.
- Use available equipment.
For example, when gardening, use a wheelbarrow to move heavy objects. At work, use mechanical aids.
- Bend your hips and knees so that your legs, not your back, do the work.
- Keep a firm grip on the load.
- Keep the load close to your body.
- When turning, move your feet instead of twisting your body.







At work

- Make sure you attend manual handling training and use safe lifting techniques.

School bags

- Buy a backpack-style schoolbag for your child.
- Encourage your child to wear the bag as a backpack on their back.
- When you are packing a bag, such as a school bag or backpack, only pack what is needed. Pack the heaviest objects closest to the child's back.

Around the house

- When moving heavy objects such as furniture, push rather than pull.
- Store objects you use often where it is easy to reach them. If possible, avoid storing them above shoulder height or below knee height.
- Work at benches or surfaces built to your waist height.



What should I do if I have acute back pain?

Acute back pain is pain that lasts for a period of time, from a few days to a few weeks. How you manage back pain will depend on how bad you feel. Even if your back is very painful, in most cases there is rarely any major damage to the spine. Managing your pain and staying active will help your back recover.

Manage your pain

- Painkillers and anti-inflammatory medications may help control the pain. Your pharmacist or GP can advise you on suitable medication.

- Apply hot or cold packs to the affected area. These can be used to help control the pain.

How to make a hot pack

- 1 Fill a hot water bottle with hot water and wrap it in a towel.
- 2 Place the hot pack on the painful area for 15 minutes.

How to make a cold pack

- 1 Wrap a bag of frozen vegetables or some ice-cubes in a damp towel.
- 2 Place the cold pack on the painful area for 15 minutes.

Take care when using hot (or cold) packs, as they can cause a burn if they are too hot (or too cold) or if they are left in place for longer than the recommended time.

- When sleeping, find a position that helps relieve your pain. Lying on your side with a pillow between your knees may help.

If the pain is severe, you may need to rest for a few days. Try not to stay in bed for more than one or two days. If you have severe leg pain or difficulty straightening up, you may have to rest in bed for longer, but remember to get active as soon as you can.

You may benefit from a visit to a qualified health professional, who will provide treatment for your back pain. Treatment may include manipulation (see page 24).

Stay active

For the first few days you may need to rest, but the sooner you get back to normal activities and work the better. Build up your activity level gradually. In the first few days you may need to avoid activities that make your pain worse or cause pins and needles.

When sitting, use an upright chair and get up and stretch or walk around every 15 minutes. Try not to do much lifting. If you must lift, follow the lifting instructions on page 18.

At work, you may need to change how you do your work for a short time, so speak to your boss and co-workers.

A qualified health professional can advise you on specific back exercises to help at this time.

Frequently asked questions

Does manipulation help back pain?

Manipulation has been shown to help relieve back pain in the early stages. It is used to reduce stiffness and relieve pain and should only be done by a qualified health professional. Manipulation can vary from small movements to more vigorous movements applied to the joints of the spine. Sometimes you may hear a 'click'. You should notice the benefits of manipulation after a few treatment sessions.

Should I have an x-ray or scan?

In most cases of back pain an x-ray or scan is not necessary. Natural wear and tear in the joints of the spine caused by ageing will show up on an x-ray, but this may not be causing your pain. Your GP will know whether you need to have an x-ray or other tests.

Can I buy anything to help relieve my back pain?

There is a wide range of products on the market that aim to relieve back pain. Some people may find them helpful, while others won't. If you are planning to buy a specific product, ask a qualified health professional for advice.

Will my back get better?

How long acute back pain lasts will vary from person to person. For some it lasts a few days, for others a few weeks, but it usually goes away. If you have had an experience of acute back pain, you are likely to experience it again. Following the general advice on how to take care of your back on pages 10 to 21, as well as specific advice from a qualified health professional, can help you prevent further back pain.

Where can I get more information?

Arthritis Ireland

Provides a good range of information on arthritis

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www.arthritis-foundation.com

tel (01) 661 8188

Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists

Provides information on various aspects of low back pain, and provide contact details for Registered Physiotherapists throughout the country

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www.iscp.ie

tel (01) 402 2148

Health and Safety Authority

Provides a wide range of publications on safety, including backcare, in the workplace

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www.hsa.ie

tel (01) 614 7000

Irish Osteoporosis Society

Provides information on all aspects of osteoporosis, including where to get help and how to help prevent osteoporosis

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www.irishosteoporosis.ie

tel (01) 677 4267



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