Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust

Management of Lower Back Pain

Information for patients

Lower back pain is common. Low back pain can be experienced into the buttock area and the legs. It can also be called non-specific, mechanical or simple low back pain. Over 80% of people can have lower back pain in their lifetime. It can happen at any age and any time. In most cases, the pain does not have a serious cause. Research has shown that symptoms improve with time, movement and return to normal activity/work. Your back needs to move to stay strong and healthy. This is the same as any other joint in your body.

Healing:

A new episode of lower back pain usually improves within 6-12 weeks. Sometimes people experience a second episode within the first 3 months to 2 years. A healthy diet and balancing rest with activity can help healing. A positive mindset also helps. For the first few weeks you may need to adapt your activities. For example, sitting for shorter periods with regular breaks. It may take time for your normal activity levels to return.

Pain:

This is a normal part of the healing process. Strong pain is not commonly linked with a bad injury. Your symptoms should improve, which may take days or weeks. Low back pain can be present for 3-6 months. You should notice a gradual improvement in your symptoms over this time.

Regular pain medication may help you return to movement and improve sleep. Be aware it may not fully resolve your symptoms. Your GP or pharmacist can advise on which medications are right for you. Heat, relaxation, massage and gentle exercise can also be useful. It is important to talk with friends and colleagues to stop you feeling isolated. Complete rest is not advised, move little and often to prevent stiffness. See **Initial Management Advice** below.

Cauda Equina Syndrome:

Cauda equina Syndrome is a rare but serious condition that affects a group of nerves called the cauda equina in your lower back. These nerves allow control of the legs, bladder and bowel and supply the sensation to your bottom, back passage, genitals and inner thighs. Cauda Equina Syndrome occurs when these nerves are compressed. If you develop any of the below symptoms, it is important you go to your local hospital as soon as possible.

- Loss of feeling/pins and needles between your inner thighs and genitals
- Numbness around your back passage or buttocks
- Altered sensation when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- Increasing difficulty when trying to urinate
- Increasing difficulty when trying to control your flow of urine
- Loss of sensation when you pass urine
- Leaking urine or recent need to use pads
- Not knowing if your bladder is 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 to genitals during sexual intercourse

These warning signs are available in different languages from:
Cauda Equina Warning Credit Cards (ifompt.org)

Initial Management Advice:

Cold packs

A cold pack can be useful to ease your symptoms. Ice or frozen peas should be wrapped in a damp towel placed on the skin. Apply for up to 15 minutes. This can be repeated during the day as required. Ice placed directly on the skin can cause skin damage/ice burns. Do not use ice treatment if you have a lack of feeling to the skin or a wound.

Stop applying ice if you experience any negative effects such as:

- A rise in pain
- More swelling
- Skin soreness

Heat packs

Heat can be useful to ease your symptoms. Apply for up to 15 minutes and repeat during the day as required. A hot water bottle or microwavable wheat bag can be used. Use the heat over clothing, this will protect your skin. Please check your skin regularly for burns or skin irritation.

Sleep

There is no correct sleeping position. However, you may find using pillows to support your back during sleeping helpful. For example, some pillows under your knees when lying on your back or a pillow placed between your knees when on your side.

Relaxation

Stress can affect healing and recovery. Breathing exercises, listening to music, talking to friends/family and relaxation can all be helpful. You may find the Alexander technique or yoga helpful for relaxation.

Work

Returning to work as soon as possible will help with recovery and wellbeing. How you do this may depend on your job role. A phased return, lighter duties, regular breaks or shorter hours can help. Please discuss this with your workplace and/or GP. This can help to discuss your options and make a realistic plan.

Smoking & Alcohol

Healing tissue times are slower with nicotine found in tobacco and vapes. A reduction in your nicotine intake for the first few weeks after injury will help. For advice on smoking cessation and local support available, please refer to the following website https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking or discuss this with your GP.

Similarly, alcohol consumption above the recommended national guidance of 14 units of alcohol per week can impair healing directly and influence the ability of every major organ in the body to function normally, each one playing a vital role in healing.

Pacing

Rest is as important to recovery as exercise. Pace yourself by slowly increasing the time on your feet. Start the exercises, do a bit more each day as your symptoms guide. Slowly return to your normal levels of activity. Sometimes your symptoms are worse for a few days if you overdo it. Try to avoid aggravating factors and adapt activities to fit in with your symptoms. Do not force through pain. Please see our leaflet on **Pacing** for further information.

The numerical pain rating scale below may help to guide you. It can be a helpful tool when you increase your activity levels.

If your pain is mild or moderate during the activity, after the activity and the next day then you can progress. If your symptoms are worse after the activity and/or the next day, consider slightly reducing how much you are doing.

Exercise:

Regular activity can help manage and prevent further episodes of back pain. The type of activity you choose does not matter. Some examples are:

Walking

Walking is good for your joints, muscles and wellbeing. Start with short walks (5-10 minutes) and build up the time, speed and surface types that you walk on as your symptoms allow. Make sure to include short rest periods if needed.

Swimming

Being in water reduces the strain on your joints and will exercise the whole body.

Yoga/Pilates

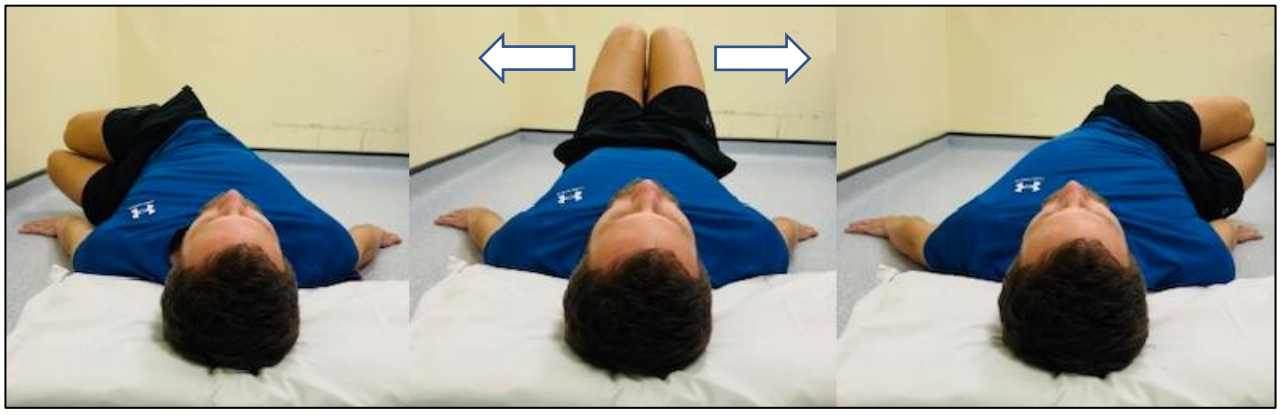
Both Yoga and Pilates help with core strength and flexibility.

Suggested Exercise Plan:

The following exercises can be helpful in providing additional relief and encourage recovery. They can be completed 2-3 times daily as symptoms allow. Do not feel you need to do all of the exercises. Choose the ones which feel most helpful and progress through them at your own pace. It is normal to feel a degree of discomfort when exercising. It is important you do not over exercise and make your symptoms worse. Please refer to the numerical pain score above for guidance, aiming to staying within the mild-moderate category when exercising (3-5).

Knee Rolls

Laying on your back on your bed or floor, knees bent and arms rested by your side. Roll your knees slowly towards the left as far as feels comfortable keeping your shoulders flat, then return to the middle. Repeat the same towards the other side. Repeat 3-5 times to each side as symptoms allow. Do not force movement, this should increase as your symptoms improve.



Hip Hugs

1. Laying on your back on your bed or floor, knees bent and arms relaxed
2. Slowly ‘hug’ one of your legs using your hands. Bring it towards your chest as far as feels comfortable. Hold for a few seconds then return to start position. Repeat the same for the other leg. Repeat 3-5 times each leg
3. Once the above feels easy, you can progress by hugging both legs together. Bring them towards your chest as far as feels comfortable. Hold for a few seconds then return to start position. Repeat 3-5 times.

Pelvic Tilts:

Laying on your back, knees bent and hands relaxed as shown in the picture. Trying to roll your pelvis backwards to flatten your back into the bed/floor. Hold for a few seconds then return to starting position. Repeat 5-10 times, as symptoms allow.

Seated Range of Movement:

In sitting, slowly slide your hands forwards down your legs to the point of stretch/discomfort. Hold 3-5 seconds then slowly return to starting position.

As above but starting with your hands on your left knee then slowly slide your hands down your left leg to the point of stretch/discomfort. Hold 3-5 seconds then slowly return to starting position.

As above but starting with your hands on your right knee then slowly slide your hands down your right leg to the point of stretch/discomfort. Hold 3-5 seconds then slowly return to starting position.

Breathing Exercises:

In standing or sitting. Take a slow deep breath in towards the base of your lungs. As you breath out reach up towards the ceiling. Take a further breath in and as you breath out return your hands to your side. Repeat 3-5 times.

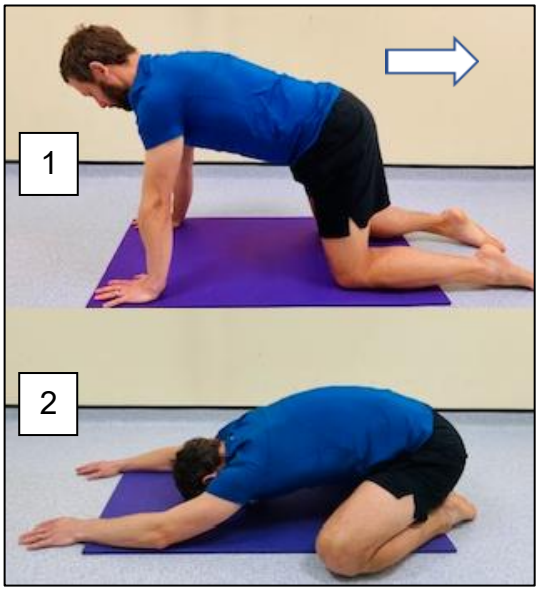
Standing side flexion:

In standing, slide your right hand down the outside of your right leg to the point of stretch/discomfort. Hold 3-5 seconds then return to standing. Repeat to the other side. Repeat 3-5 times each side, as symptoms allow.

This exercise can also be done in sitting.

Childs Pose:

1. Start on all fours on floor or bed. Your hands should be under your shoulders and knees under your hips.
2. Take a deep breath in and as you slowly breath out move your body backwards towards your heels until you feel a stretch in your lower back, do not force into pain. Hold 3-5 seconds. Breath in, and on the breath out return to start position. Repeat 3-5 times. Over time your movement should naturally increase.



Sit to Stand:

Sitting in a chair, arms across chest. Lean upper body forwards and push up to stand. Ensure even weight is going through both of your legs. Slowly sit back down. Repeat 8-12 times. If this is too difficult, you can start by doing this on a higher surface then gradually lowering the height.

Bridging:

Laying on your back with knees bent and a pillow to support your head. Squeeze your buttock muscles and slowly push through your feet to lift your hips upwards. Hold 2-3 seconds. Repeat 8-12 times.

For any other concerns and advice, please liaise with your GP. Physiotherapy can be helpful in assisting with your recovery. If your symptoms last longer than 6 weeks you can self-refer via: MSK Physiotherapy self-referral form | Kent Community Health NHS Foundation Trust

Links to other useful validated resources:

Back pain - NHS (www.nhs.uk)

Exercises for the back | Versus Arthritis

Back or Neck Pain? - BackCare

Patients – STarT Back (keele.ac.uk) this site includes animations and people's experiences of back pain.

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Further information and advice can be obtained from:

NHS 111	☎ 111
NHS Choices online	www.nhs.uk

The Trust operates a smoke free policy. This means that smoking is not permitted anywhere on hospital grounds. For Free NHS support to stop smoking please contact:

☎ **0300 123 1220**

www.oneyoukent.org.uk

www.kentcht.nhs.uk/service/one-you-smokefree/

MTW NHS Trust is committed to making its patient information accessible in a range of languages and formats. If you need this leaflet in another language or format please ask one of your clinical care team or the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). We will do our best to arrange this.

Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust welcomes all forms of feedback from our service users. If the standard of service you have received from the Trust does not meet your expectations, we want to hear from you. Please speak with the ward manager or the nurse in charge in the first instance, or you can contact the **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)** on:

Telephone: ☎ 01622 224960 or ☎ 01892 632953

Email: mtw-tr.palsoffice@nhs.net

or visit their office at either Maidstone or Tunbridge Wells Hospital between 9.00am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.

You can be confident that your care will not be affected by highlighting any areas of concern or making a complaint. The Trust will retain a record of your contact, which is held separately to any medical records. If you are acting on behalf of a patient, we may need to obtain the patient's consent in order to protect patient confidentiality. More information on PALS or making a complaint can be found on the Trust's website: www.mtw.nhs.uk or pick up a leaflet from main reception.

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