

# 10 Do's and Don'ts



**For Managing Long-Lasting Lower Back Problems**

# Do's

## 1. Know that your pain is real

Long-lasting pain is very complex and often not related to a specific injury or damage.

This can lead to people feeling not believed by others.

There are many factors which will influence pain. These include things like your activity levels and fitness, general health, sleep quality, mental wellbeing and social functioning.

Importantly, your pain is real regardless of what factors might be involved.

## 2. Stay active

Over time, regular exercise can help to control your pain as well as improve sleep and mental wellbeing. To make activities more social, consider getting involved in community initiatives such as a local walking group or a parkrun.

## 3. Sit and move in a variety of ways

A variety of postures are good for you back. It is safe to relax during everyday tasks such as sitting, bending and lifting with a round back if it doesn't hurt. Common warnings about protecting the spine are based on evidence and can lead to fear.

## 4. Focus on meaningful life activities

Lower back problems can take up all your energy. It can be difficult to focus on other things.

Rather than simply trying to reduce pain, focus on activities that bring value to your life. This can include things like going for a walk on the beach, playing with grandchildren, going for a meal with a friend or returning to work. It is important to know that it is possible to live a meaningful life while still having pain.

When we spend a lot of time and effort trying and get rid of pain, we don't have much left for anything else. Give yourself priority over your pain.

## **5. Maintain your social relationships**

Many people with lower back problems feel alone. They stop going out with friends and are unable to work. Feeling lonely can have a negative effect on your mood, sleep and activity levels. This can worsen your pain in the long term.

Look after relationships that are important to you. Think about joining a group or a class. Talk with your family, friends and employers about your issues and worries.

You do not need to 'hide' your pain and don't compare yourself to others

## **Don'ts**

### **1. Blame yourself or 'fight' your pain**

Pain is not a sign of weakness. Pain can affect people of all ages. It is easy to get trapped in a vicious cycle of trying to 'fight' the pain which can make it worse. Regular flare ups are associated with lower levels of activity, lower mood, poor sleep, frustration and taking more medicines.

Instead, try to think about what you can control. Things like your attitude and consistency to exercise over time. By sticking to your plan, you can work towards achieving goals in a gradually.

Reward yourself for taking positive steps even if they are not successful.

### **2. Assume long-lasting pain always means damage**

Think about spraining your ankle – the pain is helpful in the short term, so you don't jump or run on it too soon and worsen the injury. Given sufficient time and a gradual approach to movement, tissues heal and pain resolves. There are issues when pain persists beyond the expected tissue healing time.

Your body can protect you from certain movements or activities even when the tissues of your low back (muscles, ligaments, joints) no longer require it. Understanding that you can be sore but safe to move is empowering and can help reduce fear and pain intensity in the long term.

### **3. Rush or panic if you flare up**

Peoples journey with pain is often full of ups and downs. People typically describe these as 'good' and 'bad' days. This is quite normal.

Rather than seeing pain flare ups as a setback, they are often a useful time to reflect on situations and identify potential 'triggers'. Did you have a bad night's sleep? Did you do more activity than usual? Is work especially stressful? Flare ups can be seen as a learning opportunity.

It is important to develop multiple approaches (with a health professional) to help manage flare ups. These may include activity management, improving sleep and relaxation. Discussions around acceptance may be helpful for some.

#### **4. Believe everything you hear or read**

When people are in pain, it is very understandable that they will 'try anything'. We hear many claims in the media and on the internet about the best treatments for people with pain. Often these claims are not backed up by any research evidence. At best, some of these untested treatments will be a waste of money; at worst, they may be harmful depending on the type of treatment offered.

Usually, there is no simple solution for a complex problem so be wary of anyone offering a quick fix.

Discuss your options with a health professional who is familiar with the best evidence on how to help people with lower back problems. This will help avoid unnecessary or potentially wasteful treatments that ultimately hamper your recovery.

#### **5. Rely on scans to tell the whole story**

Scans such as X-rays, MRIs or CTs are useful for a small number of people. They are especially helpful when we suspect a person's lower back problem is due to a serious medical condition or for planning an operation. These conditions are rare and an assessment with your specialist or physiotherapist will help determine if you need a scan.

For most people, scans are often unnecessary and do not influence treatment plans. Scans are so detailed that they show lots of changes even in people without pain. For example, 4 out of 10 people over the age of 30 and 5 out of 10 people over the age of 40 have lumbar spine disc bulges on MRI. So, it's important that we don't assume that what we see on the scan is the cause of pain. It often isn't as scary as it sounds.

## Further information



For further information please consult your health professional or visit <https://myjointhealthhub.bnssg.nhs.uk/back-pain/>

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