

What is common (or non-specific) back pain?

How common is back pain?

Over the last 20 years, back pain has increasingly been recognised as a leading cause of disability in Australia and around the world^{1, 2} and on any given day in Australia up to one quarter of our population is suffering with back pain³. We also know that once you have had an episode of back pain, it is more than likely (2/3 people) that you will have back pain again⁴.

While the physiology of the human body is largely understood, the physiology of pain and the way we move is not. We do know that the back is a complex structure of joints, discs, vertebrae, ligaments, muscles and nerves. For each individual, the way the back works in synchrony with the rest of the body is unique and because of this, the way people experience their back pain is as individual as their fingerprint.

The burden of back pain

While many may accept they have back pain, it is not a trivial ailment. It is the most common condition keeping older Australians out of the workforce; quadrupling your odds of being out of the workforce if you are aged 45-64 years old⁵. The cost of back pain can be profound for individual sufferers and their families. This not only includes the actual health care costs, but also loss of income. In Australian adults, back pain represents a massive health problem with a significant cost to the economy⁶.

Effects of back pain

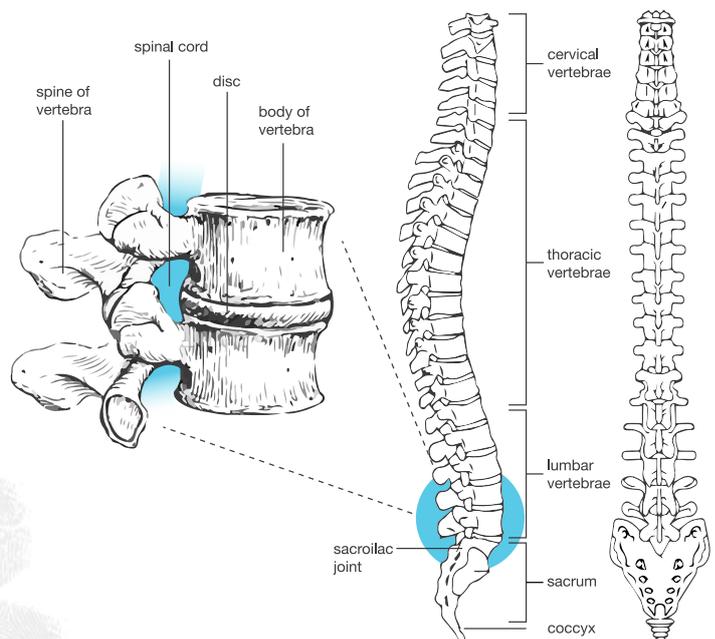
Symptoms of back pain may include:

- Ache, shooting or stabbing pain in your back and/or leg
- Weakness, pins and needles or numbness
- Limited flexibility or movement of your back
- Difficulty with activities such as walking or sitting
- Inability to stand or sit for long periods, drive a car, sit at desk, perform your job, play with your children etc.
- Inability to sleep at night

Causes of common (non-specific) back pain

The causes of back pain are many and varied⁷ however, some of the causes of non-specific back pain include:

- Poor movement patterns
- Issues with posture and injuries (e.g. muscle and ligament strain)
- Diseases (e.g. osteoarthritis / arthritis)
- Disc disease



Management of back pain

The aim of back pain management is to help people return to their normal lives as quickly and painlessly as possible⁸.

What can you do for your pain?

Most people seek help for back pain from their GP, physiotherapist, chiropractor etc, and many cases of back pain can be easily and simply treated^{3, 7, 8}. Some common advice may include:



Keep moving

Being inactive for long periods is not beneficial for recovery from back pain, and may in fact make it worse! You are far more likely to recover quickly if you continue to move.



Simple painkillers

Painkillers like paracetamol or anti-inflammatories may be effective.



Hot and Cold Treatment

Some people find that application of heat can help (e.g. a hot bath or a hot water bottle), while others find cold more effective (e.g. an ice pack). In order to get maximum benefit, you may wish to alternate between hot and cold until you have some relief.

What if the pain continues or gets worse?

Further management may include:

- **Physical therapies** – Physiotherapy, spinal manipulative therapy, massage, acupuncture, pilates and yoga are just some of the treatments available.
- **General Exercise** – Exercise provides additional health benefits that may assist with preventing further back pain episodes. Remember that the back is a complex structure and looking after your whole body will benefit your back.
- **Other medications** – your doctor may prescribe you stronger analgesic (pain relieving) drugs, or medications designed to ease symptoms that come from nerve irritation.
- **Imaging** – X Rays and other imaging options are not routinely recommended for acute pain but may become more useful if specialist opinion is required.
- **Surgery** – may be offered only in very specific cases.

Are there other options?

Although movement and pain relief are the key tools for management of back pain, there are other therapies that may be suggested to you to help with your back pain. Research has demonstrated that people with back pain move differently to people without pain^{9,10}. Health care providers now have access to technology that can analyse the way you move. Monitoring of movement and body position of people who have pain can provide insight about a patient's individual relationship of pain with movement. The technology can help people with back pain both understand and change movement patterns. This type of therapy may be very effective in changing pain in the short term as well as continuing to generate improvement over longer time periods¹¹.

So, what should I do?

If you do suffer from episodes of back pain, it's time to discuss your options with your GP (or other health care provider e.g. physiotherapist) and work together with them towards long term back health. A personalised management plan of action for identifying and addressing your individual risk factors can be put into place.

Remember that you and your back are unique, so your treatment should be specific to your situation.

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