



Acute Low Back Pain

→ A partnership approach to pain management

> What Is Acute Low Back Pain?

Acute low back pain is pain felt in the lower back that lasts for a short time (i.e. less than three months).

Most people have pain in their low back at some stage in their lives. In most cases, it will get better in several weeks; however, this varies from person to person. Acute low back pain may happen again over time.

> What Causes Acute Low Back Pain?

In around 95% of cases it is not possible to pinpoint the cause of the pain. However, it is not necessary to know the specific cause in order to manage the pain effectively.

It is rare for the pain to be caused by a serious medical problem.

> What Should I Do When I Have Acute Low Back Pain?

If your pain bothers you, it is important to see your health practitioner, to work with them to manage your pain, and to stay active.

1 See your health practitioner

A history and a physical examination are needed to assess for any serious medical conditions that may be associated with your pain, although these are rare.

Your practitioner can provide you with information about your pain once they have assessed you. Ask for an explanation if unfamiliar terms are used. Sometimes a diagram can be useful.

Additional investigations, such as xrays and blood tests, are not needed in the majority of cases of acute low back pain. They do not help with your pain or your ability to move your back.

It is normal to worry about the cause of your pain and the impact it may have on you. Talking to your health practitioner about your concerns can be helpful. You will usually find there is no serious cause and that there are ways to relieve your symptoms.

MAIN MESSAGES

- Work with your health practitioner to manage your pain and address your concerns
- Stay active

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

A panel of experts recently reviewed the scientific studies on the effectiveness of treatments for acute low back pain and found that not all treatments have been studied in detail.

The findings of this review are published in the report *Evidence-Based Management of Acute Musculoskeletal Pain* available at www.nhmrc.gov.au. The results are summarised below.

Effective

Measures that are effective for relieving acute low back pain are: staying active (relieves pain better than resting in bed), having written information (it is

helpful to discuss written information with your health practitioner) and heat wrap therapy (a treatment not routinely available in Australia).

Mixed results*

There are mixed results from scientific studies on the use of muscle relaxants, anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and spinal manipulation. Some studies show these measures relieve acute low back pain and some do not.

Inconclusive*

Studies on acupuncture, back exercises, back schools, bed rest, cognitive behavioural therapy, injection therapy and topical treatments for acute low

back pain have not tested these treatments against placebo.

No studies done*

There are no studies that have looked at: pain-relieving medication (analgesics), electromyographic biofeedback, lumbar supports, massage, multi-disciplinary rehabilitation in the workplace, traction and TENS for the treatment of acute low back pain.

*** It is important to note that these findings do not mean that these measures will not help you; they indicate that more research is needed.**



Australian Government

National Health and Medical Research Council

2 Work with your health practitioner to manage your pain

The goal is to help you find ways to manage your pain and return to your usual activities.

Most people find that their low back pain settles down over a short period of time as healing occurs. Pain-relieving measures may help you cope with your symptoms while nature takes its course.

There is a range of pain-relieving measures available. While there are few scientific studies proving their effectiveness, this does not mean that a particular measure will not help you (see What the Research Says).

When considering what measures to use for your pain, it is helpful to discuss the following points with your health practitioner:

- Your pain level and your concerns
- What measures are available to relieve acute low back pain (what they involve, how they work, their benefits and risks, their effectiveness)
- Your need for additional information

3 Stay active

Your pain may make it difficult to carry out your usual activities, and you may even want to rest completely.

However, it is important to resume normal activities as soon as possible. Staying active helps to prevent long-term problems.

You may need to use pain-relieving measures to help you gradually return to your usual activity level. If you are working, a programme of selected duties or reduced hours of work may be needed. This applies to work at home as well.

Follow-up visits

It is important to maintain contact with your health practitioner.

If the pain is not settling down or is getting worse, you may need further assessment.

Follow-up visits provide you with an opportunity to obtain more information. If you have any questions to ask your health practitioner, write them down and discuss them at your next visit.

The content of this information sheet is based on: Australian Acute Musculoskeletal Pain Guidelines Group (2003). *Evidence-Based Management of Acute Musculoskeletal Pain*, available at www.nhmrc.gov.au

The project was funded by the Department of Health and Ageing, Canberra.

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ISBN 1864962275

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