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Acute Thoracic Spinal Pain

→ A partnership approach to pain management

This brochure answers questions about acute pain in the thoracic spine (upper back).

> What Is Acute Thoracic Spinal Pain?

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

> What Causes Acute Thoracic Spinal Pain?

In most cases it is not possible to pinpoint the cause of acute thoracic spinal pain. However, it is not necessary to have a specific diagnosis of the cause in order to manage the pain effectively.

Generally, the pain will settle down over time and with minimal treatment. It is rare for the pain to be caused by a serious medical problem.

> What Should I Do When I Have Acute Thoracic Spinal 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 after you have been assessed. 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 thoracic spinal 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.

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 pain settles down over time as healing occurs. Pain-relieving measures may help you cope with your symptoms while nature takes its course.

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 scientific studies on the effectiveness of treatments for acute thoracic spinal pain and found there is both a lack of evidence (i.e. few or no scientific studies conducted) and a lack of high quality studies on pain-relieving treatments for this type of pain.

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

While there is evidence from one small study that spinal manipulation is

beneficial for thoracic spinal pain, further research is needed to confirm this.

The lack of information does not mean that this and other treatments will not be of benefit to you; it indicates that more research is needed.



Australian Government

National Health and Medical Research Council

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 with your health practitioner:

- Your pain level and your concerns
- What measures are available to relieve acute thoracic spinal 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 for you to carry out your usual activities, and you might feel like resting completely.

In general, it is important to resume normal activities as soon as possible. Maintaining the use of your back may help to prevent long-term problems.

You may need to use pain-relieving measures to help you return to your usual activity level. If you are working, the plan could include a programme of selected duties or reduced hours of work. 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

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