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# Management of Chronic Low Back Pain

## Physiotherapy Department



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## Further Information

We endeavour to provide an excellent service at all times, but should you have any concerns please, in the first instance, raise these with the Matron, Senior Nurse or Manager on duty. If they cannot resolve your concern, please contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01932 723553 or email [pals@asph.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@asph.nhs.uk). If you remain concerned, PALS can also advise upon how to make a formal complaint.

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**This booklet has been created to help you with your understanding of chronic low back pain and how you can self-manage.**

**There has been lots of research to show that the more you understand your pain, the easier it is to manage.**

### **Basic Spinal Anatomy**

Firstly, get to know your spine.

Your spine is made up of lots of small bones called vertebra.

The first 7 vertebra make up your cervical spine, the next 12 make up thoracic spine and the final 5 make the lumbar spine.

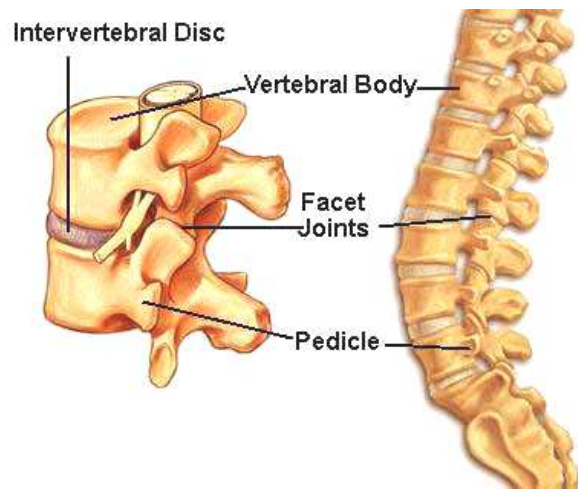
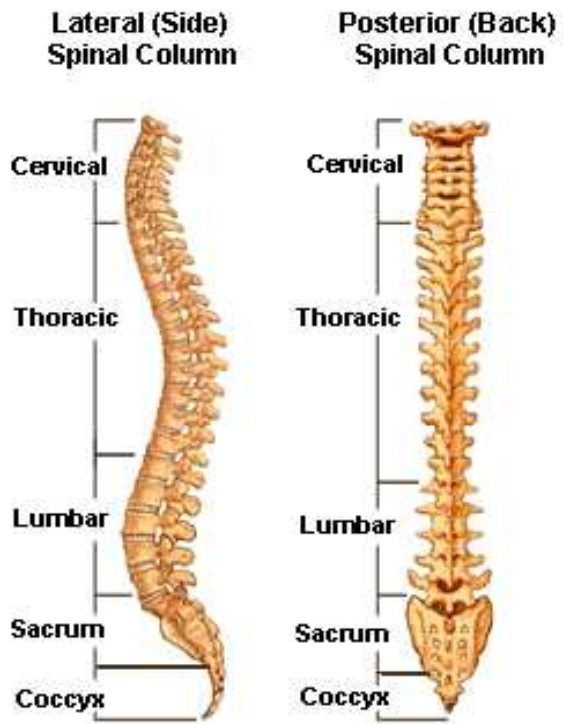
Below the lumbar spine is your sacrum and your coccyx which is sometimes known as the 'tail bone'.

Between the vertebrae are small discs called intervertebral discs.

Nerves exit at each level in the spine and supply different parts of your body.

Your spine is designed to protect your spinal cord, provide movement and flexibility.

# The Spine



Source: <http://www.spineuniverse.com/anatomy/spinal-anatomy-slideshow>

## Useful resources

### Institute of Chronic Pain

<http://www.instituteforchronicpain.org/>

### Arthritis Research UK

<http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org/arthritis-information/conditions/back-pain.aspx>

### Pain toolkit

<http://www.paintoolkit.org/>

### Relaxation

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/ways-relieve-stress.aspx>

[www.asph.mobi/relaxation.mp3](http://www.asph.mobi/relaxation.mp3)

[www.ashfordstpeters.nhs.uk/chronic-pain](http://www.ashfordstpeters.nhs.uk/chronic-pain)

### Mindfulness training

[www.getsomeheadspace.com](http://www.getsomeheadspace.com)

Be in control of your pain!

Do not let pain become part of your self-identity, many people with chronic pain are able to manage and do not allow it to interfere in daily life.

Back pain can be categorised into two types: **acute or chronic**.

Acute pain can be caused by tissue damage from an injury. All tissues go through a natural healing time after an inflammatory period. This can take a few weeks to months. You will be encouraged to continue moving and you will gradually return back to normal function.

However, pain can still persist even after the initial injury has healed. This type of pain will be defined as chronic pain if it lasts over three months and at this time the cause becomes more complex. At this point, ongoing pain is to do with the nervous system rather than damaged structure.

## What is pain?

It is important to understand that pain is normal! It is a protective response to signal a threat to the body.

The body is full of receptors which respond to various things. Once they respond to a stimulus, an electrical impulse is sent to the spinal cord and it is then taken to the brain. If your brain thinks that you are in danger, it will produce pain.

If you are suffering with chronic pain, the way your body perceives certain things (or threats) is very different from those who do not have chronic pain.

Your pain signals will be altered so that a small movement such as bending will be perceived as a threat, therefore provoking pain as a protective response.

Pain is controlled by the brain, however it is still very real.

## **I'm worried that there is something more serious going on...**

Mechanical low back pain is the most common form of back pain and accounts for approximately 85% of cases. During your assessment, your physiotherapist will have taken information from you and your past medical history to rule out any signs of serious pathology.

Physiotherapists are trained in recognising red flags (indicators of serious pathology) and the appropriate actions to take if any of these are found.

Some people may have had scans such as MRIs and X-Rays, however this is not necessary in most cases of low back pain.



## **Losing Weight**

In the last 20 years, the incidence of obesity has tripled and the incidence of reported low back pain has doubled.

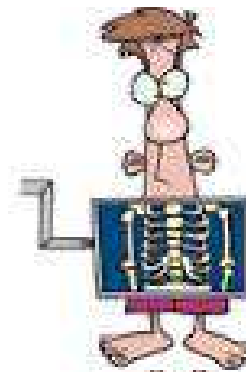
If you have back pain, it does not necessarily mean that you are overweight. However, if you are over-weight, your body has to work harder to support itself.

Exercising will burn calories and raise your metabolism so that your body can process the energy that you consume more effectively.

Although exercise is important, it is equally as key to eat well. Most foods come with labelling that can show you how many calories or fat you are eating. Healthy eating will raise your energy levels and make you feel better within yourself.

Everyone's needs will be different depending on your build and what activities you do.

Talk to your GP or a dietician about the best way for you to lose weight.



## Sleeping

It is common for those with chronic back pain to have inconsistent or poor quality sleep. Its inconsistency, rather than a lack of sleep that changes the way your body regulates pain.

Tips for restful sleep...

- Find a comfortable position to sleep in with the right pillows and bed to support you
- Relax before you go to bed, calming music or breathing exercises
- Try not to nap during the day and wait until you are tired before you try to sleep
- Get a regular sleeping pattern- your body likes routine! Try to wake up at a similar time each morning
- Try not to use mobile phones or tablet devices before going to bed- the light they emit is the same frequency as early morning light and therefore will wake you up!
- Keep work away from your bed. Use your bed as a space for sleeping and relaxing and nothing else



## Central sensitisation

Your physiotherapist may have told you that you are centrally sensitised. Central sensitisation is a condition that is associated with the development of chronic pain.

This simply means that your nervous system has become hypersensitive and therefore non-painful stimulus (such as light touch), can be perceived as painful to your brain.

You may have hyperalgesia which is when a painful stimulus is perceived as more painful than it should do. Alternatively, you may have allodynia, which is when a person experiences pain with a stimulus that is not usually painful.

You may find that your clothes, people bumping into you or light touch is very painful, and for some it can be unbearable.

You will know yourself that these shouldn't be painful, however your body is in a heightened state of sensitivity. Your pain receptors are therefore confused and will register these stimuli as threatening and therefore will produce pain.

## De-sensitisation

How to de-sensitise your body:

Your body needs to re-learn that these stimuli are not harmful to your body. You can do this with materials that you can find around the house.

**Step 1:** start easy with something soft such as cotton wool or tissue. Rub these materials gently over the sensitive area and to the non-sensitive area.

Think about how the non-sensitive side feels and imagine it being the same on the sensitive side.

**Step 2:** chose a material that is a little harder such as a loafer or scrunched up paper.

Eventually your nerves will become less sensitive to these non-painful stimuli.

## But my doctor said my spine is degenerating!

Degeneration is common and if most of the population were scanned, a large proportion would show some degeneration of varying degrees in their spine. Degeneration is not always the source of pain. In fact, many people with severe degeneration have no back pain at all.

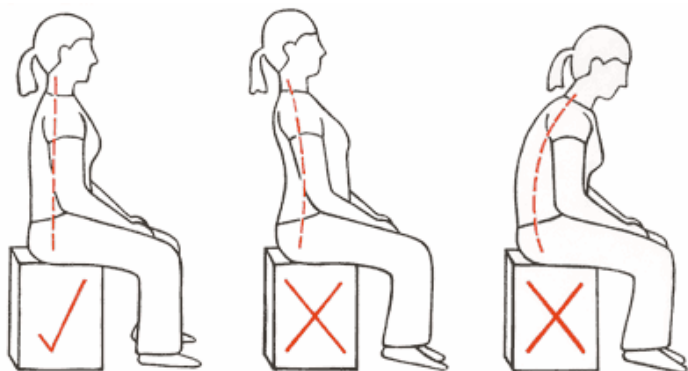
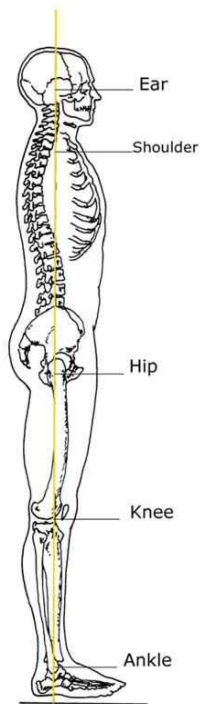
## Posture Tips

1. Don't sit in one position for more than 20 minutes at a time (even if you have an ergonomic office chair).
2. Every 20 minutes, stand up, stretch and move around.
3. Remember good posture needs to be maintained all the time, sitting at your desk, watching TV or walking. The more you practice good posture, the easier it will become.
4. Ask a friend, colleague or family member to watch your posture and let you know when you sink back into bad habits. If you are concerned about your work place and posture, ask your employer for an occupational health review.

People often ask if they should wear a back brace to improve their posture. This is not recommended as it can cause your back to become more stiff and weaker.



## Good posture to reduce back pain



Source:  
<http://www.applehealthwellness.com/self-test-for-posture-problems/>  
[http://www.jennifergreentherapies.co.uk/health/correct\\_posture](http://www.jennifergreentherapies.co.uk/health/correct_posture)

## How can I manage my pain?

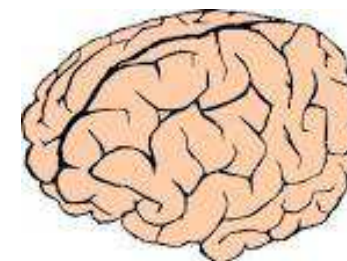
For those with chronic pain, self-management is key. There are lots of ways that you can help yourself and there is no reason why you cannot lead a normal life that is not dominated by pain.

The following advice and information is designed to aid you in coming up with your own self-management plan for your ongoing care.

### 1. Education

Education is very important to enable you to understand why you are in pain and what you can do about it.

Ask health professionals to explain anything you don't understand in a way that is best for you. For many people, education is the most important process in their management.



**Explain pain in 5 minutes. A video in understanding pain**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C\\_3phB93rvI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_3phB93rvI)

## 2. Goal Setting

Goal setting can be helpful to give you something meaningful to work towards. Spend time thinking about what you would like to achieve and discuss with your physiotherapist how you can achieve this.

Don't be overly ambitious to start with, pick something realistic and something that is important to you. However try not to make them directly related to pain. Goals can be very simple such as being able to bend down to put your shoes on, being able to walk to the shops or being able to play with your grandchildren.

Remember...

Goals are all about **problem solving!**



## 6. Improve your posture

Everyone's body is different, including their spines. Some people have an increased curve (lordosis) in the lower part of their spine, some people have flat backs and some people have curves to the side (scoliosis).

Bad posture causes added stresses to your spine. This includes whilst you are standing, walking and sitting.

Posture can be hard to change but the first step is becoming aware of what your posture is like and what good posture is.

### Good standing posture

Look at yourself in the mirror. Your ears should be above your shoulders which should be directly above your hips, knees and ankles. Imagine drawing a vertical line down the side of your body to recognise what needs to be where.

The diagrams on the next page demonstrate good posture.

## 5. Pacing

Pacing is used to gradually increase your level of activity. People with chronic pain often have good days and bad days and pacing is about increasing the good days gradually. Push yourself too much and this will take much longer to achieve

Initially you may find that you are only able to do a small amount of exercise but this will gradually increase. Take a break before you need it and find an easing position for any pain you have.

Example: You are able to walk for 10 minutes pain free. Next time you go for a walk you try 20 minutes but this causes a lot of pain. Instead try doing two 8 minute walks instead, with a rest in between.



Credit: <http://davidwilkison.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/working-out.jpg>

What possible obstacles might you have? How will you overcome these?			
When are you going to achieve this by?			
How are you going to achieve this?			
Goal			

### 3. Relaxation

Pain is complex. It can be influenced by not only physical factors but also emotional and social.

Your body can react to stress the same way as it does to a physical stimulus and many people associate stress with an increased period of pain.

During a period of stress, your body releases the chemical cortisol. If this is sustained, you can experience an increased vulnerability to pain and this can lead to chronicity.

#### How to **control stress**...

Everyone goes through stressful periods of time throughout life. Some of this will be unavoidable.

There are various things you can do to help yourself reduce stress. You may have to try a few different things before you find something that suits you. Some people find activities such as walking or reading relaxing and these may help reduce pain.

The internet is full of useful tips and advice on relaxation including videos, podcasts and apps (see pg. 23). Everyone is different and will find some forms or relaxation more helpful than others. Have a look yourself to find what's most suitable to you.

### 4. Exercise

The spine, like any other joint, likes to move. This keeps it strong and flexible and able to do its job in supporting you in daily life. The spine itself needs to be supported by muscles which can become weak very quickly if they are under-used or if they are used badly. Exercise is important to maintain your spines movement to avoid it becoming stiff and more painful.

#### **Exercise is also an excellent mood regulator**

During exercise, your body releases endorphins, a hormone that is your natural pain and stress fighter, therefore reducing pain and improving mood.

Your physiotherapist will be able to advise you on exercises that are best for you.

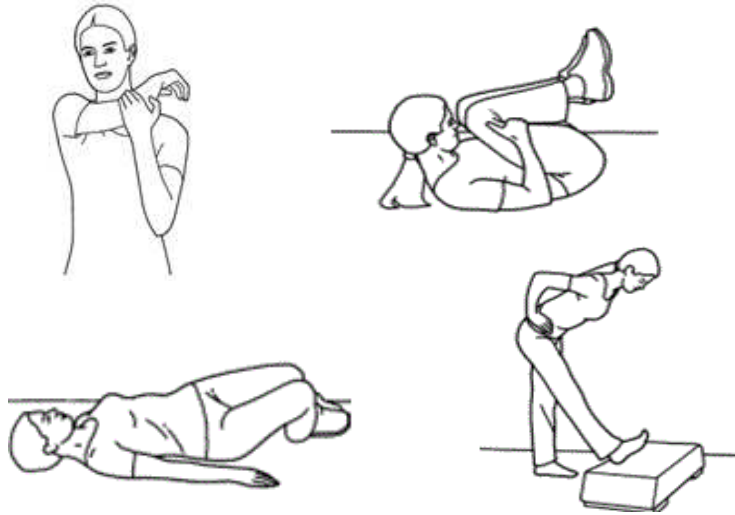
However, do more exercise than your body is prepared for, or 'battling through the pain', is likely to aggravate your back and therefore cause more pain.

This is where the principle of **pacing** comes in...





## Try some simple stretches throughout the day:



Start with a 5 second hold, gradually increase as able. Aim to do this a couple of times a day

## Try some breathing exercises:

1. Place one hand on your belly and close your eyes
2. Let your shoulders drop and your body relax
3. Keep your mouth closed and slowly breath through your nose whilst pushing your stomach out
4. When you have inhaled as much air is comfortable, pause
5. Breathe slowly out through your mouth and bring your belly in
6. Repeat for as long as you need

## When is the last time you did something just because you enjoy doing it?

It is easy to forget about simple pleasures in life and these often get disregarded when you are busy. This often happens more when you are in pain.

**What do you enjoy doing?** This could be a sport, a skill you have or even simple things you enjoy doing at home such as reading

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## What do you enjoy about it?

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