

# I HAVE BACK PAIN...HELP! WHAT SHOULD I DO?



At The Jersey Sports & Spinal Clinic we have a particular interest in challenging common yet unhelpful beliefs which exist about low back pain. In this leaflet we will explore some options for a person who is in pain, based on some of the common questions posed by our clients.

## *What should I do when I initially hurt my back or if the pain is severe?*

Evidence and research show that it is best to start simply. The effectiveness of non-prescription painkillers, for example Paracetamol, is limited, they are as effective as stronger medications, for example anti-inflammatories, which have greater side effects.

From an activity perspective, in the first few days after the initial injury, avoiding aggravating activities may help relieve the pain, similar to pain in any other part of the body such as a sprained ankle. However, there is strong evidence that keeping active and returning to all usual activities gradually, including work and hobbies are both important in aiding recovery. It is best to remain relaxed and active as it will help the pain to settle more quickly. In fact, your back gets stronger with movement.

In contrast, prolonged bed rest is unhelpful and is associated with higher levels of pain, poorer recovery and longer absence from work. In fact, it appears that the longer a person stays in bed because of back pain the worse the pain becomes.

Identifying what triggered the back pain episode can be helpful.

## *Should I get a scan to better understand my pain?*

Both healthcare professionals and members of the public often consider having a scan 'just in case' it is something serious causing their pain.

We used to think that if we got a good enough picture of the spine with a scan it would be a big help in solving back pain. However, we now know that this is most often not the case. All the evidence suggests scans only show something truly important in the tiny minority (less than 5%) of people with back pain. Unfortunately, when people have scans for back pain, the scans often show up things that are not necessarily linked with pain. In fact, studies have shown that people who do not have back pain have normal things like bulging discs (52% of people), degenerated discs (90%), herniated discs (28%) and arthritic changes (38%) visible on their scans. Remember, these people do not have pain.

Unfortunately many people with back pain are often told that these things indicate their back is damaged and this can lead to further fear, distress and avoidance of activity. The fact is that many of these things reported on scans are more like baldness – an indication of ageing and genetics that do not have to be painful. A brief consultation with a chartered physiotherapist at The JSSC or your GP will usually be able to identify if a scan is really needed based on a person's symptoms and medical history.

## Will I need surgery?

Only a tiny proportion of people with back pain require surgery. Most people with back pain can manage it by staying active, developing a better understanding of what pain means and identifying various factors that are involved in their pain. This should help them continue their usual daily tasks, without having to resort to surgery. On average, the results for spinal surgery are no better in the medium and long term than non-surgical treatment.

## Should I avoid activities that hurt, like bending and lifting?

It is common, especially during the first few days of back pain, for your movement and activity to be significantly altered. This is similar to limping after spraining your ankle and generally resolves as the pain settles.

While initially hard, getting back to doing valued activities which are painful or feared is important. Many people after an episode of pain can begin to move differently due to the fear or a belief that the activity is dangerous. Such altered movements can be unhealthy in the long term and can actually increase the strain on your back.

People with back pain often believe that activities such as lifting, bending and twisting are dangerous and should be avoided. However, contrary to common belief, research to date has not supported a consistent association between any of these factors and back pain. Of course, a person can strain their back if they lift something awkwardly or lift something that is much heavier than they would usually lift. Similarly if a person has back pain these activities might be more sore than usual. This, however, does not mean that the activity is dangerous or should be avoided.

While a bending or lifting incident could initially give a person back pain, bending and lifting is a normal activity and should actually be practiced to help strengthen the back, similar to returning to running and sport after spraining your ankle.

## Should I exercise?

Many people with pain are afraid of exercise and avoid it as they think it may cause them more problems. However, this is not true! We now know that regular exercise keeps you and your body fit and healthy and actually reduces pain and discomfort. It relaxes muscle tension, helps mood and strengthens the immune system once started gradually and progressed over time.

All types of exercise are good. Exercising in a group and exercising on your own can both be of benefit. It is important that you pick a form of exercise you enjoy.

Walking, using the stairs, cycling, jogging, running and stretching are all good and help to relax tension in your body. When you are in pain, starting exercise can be daunting. Underused muscles feel more pain than healthy muscles. Therefore, if feeling sore after exercise this does not indicate harm or damage to the body. The JSSC delivers a number of exercise classes to guide your recovery.

## What other factors are worth addressing to help my pain?

Poor sleep, stress and low mood negatively influence back pain. In the same way that these factors are linked to other health conditions like cold sores, IBS and tiredness, they have a very large effect on back pain through increasing the sensitivity of our nervous system, our immunity and increasing muscle tension. As a result, by improving our mood and sleep levels, doing the things we enjoy and engaging in relaxation and exercise can be really helpful in alleviating back pain. Your physiotherapist at The JSSC has the qualifications, skills and experience to be able to guide you and direct you towards resolving your pain.

## Points to remember

1. The back is a strong robust structure which is designed to move.
2. Serious or permanent damage is rare.
3. Finding things on scans such as disc bulges is completely normal in people with and without back pain with no differences between the scans in these people. Therefore it is important not to be distracted or distressed by them.
4. X-rays and MRIs are rarely needed; since pain is driven by lots of factors it is very rarely something that shows up on a scan.
5. The best treatment is an approach that involves keeping active, improving your body's capacities, thinking positively about your back and adopting a healthy lifestyle by enhancing exercise, sleep, stress reduction and relaxation.

## The Jersey Sports & Spinal Clinic

The Jersey Sports & Spinal Clinic is a private physiotherapy clinic based in St Helier. The founders are Nigel and Lisa Mann and are supported by a team of highly skilled, qualified and experienced physiotherapists. Alongside the Pilates instructors, together they strive to deliver 'Unparalleled excellence in rehab'.

They believe in a team approach to achieve the best outcome for their clients. Each therapist in the clinic has had different education, training and specialist interests, and the sum of all experiences results in a comprehensive knowledge of the science and medicine of injury, healing and recovery.

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