

What to do when back pain strikes

There are many simple steps you can take to manage your back pain according to **Dries Hettinga**

Approximately 80 per cent of the population will experience back pain at some stage in their lives – and half of us will experience back pain this year. Since back pain is so common, it is important to know what to do when back pain strikes and how to prevent new episodes from occurring.

Arthritis may be a possible cause of back pain, but in many cases it is difficult to find out the exact cause of the pain. However, irrespective of the underlying cause, there are a number of things you can do to control the pain and reduce the impact it has on your life. Many people find that their back pain goes away within days or weeks, but may reappear. Effective management of back pain, therefore, often involves speeding up the recovery of the current episode of back pain and preventing back pain from re-occurring.

Staying active is one of the key aspects of good back care. When in pain, you may feel like doing as little as possible. However, this often slows down recovery from back pain so try to stay as active as you can.

Options include a daily walk, some gentle stretches when you

TIPS FOR MANAGING BACK PAIN AT HOME

- Try a rolled-up towel or jumper in the small of your back to help support the natural curve.
- Avoid slumping in the kitchen by standing your washing-up bowl on the draining board and sitting down to prepare vegetables.
- When vacuuming, keep your upper body upright, and with the cleaner close to your body use short sweeping movements.
- Only iron essential items. Make sure your ironing board is at waist height.
- Check the suitability of your mattress by lying on your back and sliding your hand (palm down) into the small of your back. If there is a large gap, the mattress is probably too hard. If you have to squeeze your hand in, then it is probably too soft. If your hand slides in fairly easily, the mattress is probably just right.
- If you have neck pain, try making a butterfly pillow. Tie a bandage or stocking around the centre of the pillow and place your neck in the middle.
- When making beds, kneel down to tuck in corners rather than stooping.

wake up and go to bed, a regular swimming session in the local pool, or hydrotherapy if it is available. Ask your healthcare professional how you can use exercise to care for your back.

The key thing is to do something you enjoy enough to keep it up.

In some cases the pain may be too severe to function normally. If this is the case, you can use over-the-counter medication to control the pain. If in doubt on what medication to use or how to use it effectively, you can always ask your GP or pharmacist for advice.

Try keeping a pain diary so that you can see which activities result in an increase in pain and see if there are ways of changing what you do. An important aspect of this is pacing. Back pain often comes and goes, and while some people may want to do everything that they have to do in the periods of minimum pain, it is better to try to spread your workload.

Heavy lifting with much twisting and bending is often associated with back pain. To reduce the risks of heavy lifting contributing to your back pain, you should use manual lifting aids where available, and if you have to lift, bend from your knees, if you are able to, and not from your back. When carrying heavy goods, such as the weekly shopping, you may find that using a trolley or a backpack makes carrying the load easier. When you are using a backpack, you should wear it over both shoulders to ensure an even loading of your spine.

With the above tips, your back pain may become a lot more manageable.

But everyone is different – people play their own strategies to manage back pain. Maggie Hayward, who has been

experiencing back pain for many years says:

‘My number one tip is to always have a realistic goal. I manage my pain with gentle exercise, keeping as active as possible and try to do things I enjoy. I accept I have this condition – acceptance being the important word. I think positively as there is always someone worse than me and often younger too.’ **an**

Dr Dries Hettinga is research and information manager at BackCare, the charity for healthier backs. For information on back pain, contact BackCare's helpline: 0845 130 2704 or visit www.backcare.org.uk

