

Acute lower back pain

The majority of us will experience an acute (new pain, present for less than 3 months) episode of lower back pain in our lifetimes. The vast majority of these cases will resolve within a few weeks with the correct management and exercises.

There can be various triggers for the pain, some known, some unknown. Perhaps you recently took a long car journey, or re-arrange the lounge or kitchen. Maybe you decided you wanted to get fit again and hit the gym like you did 10 years ago. Sometimes the pain can come on for no apparent reason.

Your lumbar spine is made up of 5 strong vertebrae, separated with strong shock absorbers called discs that sit between each vertebrae, as well as multiple layers of muscles, ligaments and connective tissue. All of these structures work together and give your back strength and flexibility, allowing your back to be the strongest part of your body. Acute lower back pain is usually caused by excess stresses and strains being placed upon these tissues.



As your lower back is essential to all movements in your body, pain in this area can often feel more severe than elsewhere. The natural healing time for these structures is generally 4-6 weeks, and exercise is a key element to this. You may notice a tendency to stiffen up quickly, but immobility can make you stiffer and weaker - so aim to change positions regularly, consider lying for short periods, sitting for short periods, and walking for short periods. Be a fidget and move every 20 minutes to help!

As well as exercise and movement, ensuring comfortable efficient positions to sit, sleep and work in is essential to allowing your back to recover from an acute episode of pain. Your Osteopath will be able to assist you with this.

Our spines have evolved to work best in certain positions. For example, if you sit slumped for long periods your muscles will eventually fatigue and may become uncomfortable, so it is advisable to sit with your upper back supported and a slight arch in your lower back. More importantly though, remember to get up and move about! Your practitioner may also suggest taking some anti-inflammatories or painkillers to help you through this initial period. This can help to prevent you developing abnormal postures, which may hinder your recovery. Please check with your Osteopath if this is appropriate for you.

Once the initial pain starts to ease a little, you will benefit from increasing your movement to include gentle exercises. These will be given to you by your practitioner and are often best done in small amounts over the course of the day. Eventually these exercises need to be progressed to become more challenging in order to increase the tolerance and robustness of your spine, to help prevent future recurrence.

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