



Somerset Community Pain  
Management Service

**Working together  
on my health**

## Back Pain

**Back pain is very common and can cause a great deal of concern. However, serious or permanent back pain is rare.**

**There's more good news – back pain can be managed with both medicines and non-medical techniques. If we look at back pain in the right way, it becomes easier to manage, or even overcome.**

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It can be very difficult to give an exact explanation for the cause of back pain. It is now commonly accepted that finding a specific reason is not usually necessary. Instead, how you manage the pain is the key to improving things.

Since the mid-1990s the medical profession has changed how it treats people who have back pain. The advice used to be to rest and take it easy until the pain got better. However, we now know, from extensive medical research, that people who stay active and keep doing their normal activities, including work, will make better progress in the long term.

Read on to find out more. If you need more information on back pain, then click on the 'Get Information' section of the patient online platform, available for users registered with the pain service. This site is accessible on the Pain Service website. Patients who are not registered with the service can find information on the 'Get More Information/Resources' section of the same website.

## How common is back pain?

Most people (84%) will experience back pain at some point during their life.

- Between 44% and 78% will have it more than once
- 23% of people go on to develop long term back pain

Back pain is now one of the most common reasons for:

- Seeing your GP
- Taking time off work

We know that most back pain is **not** due to any serious disease or damage.

## What should we do about back pain?

You might feel that you should have an x-ray or MRI scan to help doctors to find out exactly what is causing your pain. However, this may not be appropriate for the following three reasons:

1. X-rays and MRI scans will be able to detect serious problems related to the spine. However, the problem may be coming from the way that other parts of the body such as the muscles, ligaments and pain nerves **work together**. There might not be anything wrong with the individual parts at all. An x-ray or MRI would not be able to see anything wrong in this case.
2. Most on-going back pain is caused by the muscles being **weak** and “out of condition” and the joints being **stiff** from not being moved enough. These would not show up on an x-ray or MRI.

## What should we do about back pain? Continued...

3. The other problem with having an x-ray or MRI is that they can give us **misleading** information. For example:

*“An x-ray or MRI scan may show what health care professionals call degenerative or age related changes. This can be misleading because even people who do not have back pain can have the same changes on their x-ray or MRI. This is not due to damage but part of the normal ageing process, just like grey hair and wrinkles. However, being told you have “degenerative changes” in your spine could be worrying for you.”*

Because of these reasons you may not be offered any investigations for your back pain. Specialists in back problems are able to tell, by listening to your symptoms and examining you, whether or not scans and x-rays are required. Once this has been done it rarely needs to be repeated – even if your pain seems worse.

## Common terms associated with back pain

Health care professionals often use terms or labels to try and help people understand their pain. You may have been told what the cause of your pain is by a variety of different people. Sometimes this information can sound conflicting. This may be because people are using different terms that actually mean the same thing. Sometimes it can be because even experts have slightly different opinions about things. If this is the case it may be helpful to ask for further clarification. The next page has a list of terms that you may have come across.

## Common terms associated with back pain continued...

<b>Lumbago</b>	<b>Crumbling Spine</b>
<b>Trapped Nerve</b>	<b>Degeneration</b>
<b>Sciatica</b>	<b>A Slipped Disk</b>
<b>Wear and tear</b>	<b>Crushed Vertebra</b>

Healthcare professionals often use these terms to describe different types of back pain. However, it is now generally agreed that we cannot be this specific about the cause of most long-term back pain.

Sometimes the labels you are given can be **inaccurate** or can sound very worrying. They may make you feel that you have on-going back damage and should be careful not to make things worse. In fact terms such as 'crumbling spine' and 'degenerative spine' are unhelpful as the spine is not 'crumbling' they really mean that you have normal age related changes.

You may feel frustrated to be told that there are no investigations that can be done and that there is no specific cause for your pain.

- This **does not** mean that you do not have pain. Clearly you do.
- It **does** mean that you **do not** have anything seriously wrong that needs to be fixed.
- It **does** mean that you may benefit from being supported to understand more about pain, what it means, how it works and how to get on with your life despite it.