Back pain
This booklet provides information and answers to your questions about this condition.
What is back pain?

Back pain is very common and usually doesn’t have a serious cause. In this booklet we’ll explain a bit more about back pain and its causes, how it’s diagnosed and treated, and the importance of self-help measures. We’ll also suggest where you can get more information.

At the back of this booklet you’ll find a brief glossary of medical words - we’ve underlined these when they’re first used in the booklet.

www.arthritiscare.org
What’s inside?

2 Back pain at a glance
4 What is back pain?
5 How is the back structured?
6 What causes back pain?
8 Should I see a doctor?
   - What are the warning signs of a serious problem?
8 What can I do to help myself?
   - Painkillers
   - Exercise
   - Posture
   - Complementary medicine
   - Lifting correctly
   - Diet and nutrition
   - Pain management programmes
15 Why does back pain become chronic?
17 What is the outlook?
17 How are back problems diagnosed?
   - What tests are there?
18 What treatments are there for back pain?
   - Physical therapies
   - Drugs
   - Surgery
21 What if my back pain is affecting my work?
21 Research and new developments
22 Glossary
23 Where can I find out more?
28 We're here to help
At a glance
Back pain

What is back pain?
Back pain is a common problem, which affects 4 out of 5 of us at some point. It’s often caused by a simple muscle, tendon or ligament strain and not usually by a serious problem.

What can I do to help myself?
There are several ways you can help yourself, including:
- taking painkillers
- exercising regularly
- checking your posture
- lifting things correctly
- finding out about complementary medicine and pain management programmes.

What causes it?
In most cases the cause of back pain is unclear, but some back pain may be caused by a range of factors, including:
- poor posture
- lack of exercise resulting in stiffening of the spine
- muscle strains/sprains.
But there are some specific conditions associated with a painful back, including spondylosis, sciatica and spinal stenosis.

When should I see my doctor?
You should see your doctor if your pain:
- is very severe or lasts for a long period of time
- affects your everyday activities.
Very rarely, back pain can indicate a more serious problem. See your doctor immediately if:
- you have difficulty controlling or passing urine
- you lose control of your bowels
- you have numbness around your back passage or your genitals
- you have weakness in your legs or are unsteady on your feet.
What treatments are there?
Taking painkillers, staying active and doing some exercise are the most common things that help most people with back pain. If you need more treatment this may include:

- physiotherapy
- occupational therapy
- drug treatments such as amitriptyline, gabapentin and pregabalin
- injections
- surgery
What is back pain?

Back pain is a common problem, usually caused by a simple muscular strain, which affects 4 out of 5 of us at some point. Fortunately, most periods of back pain get better after a few weeks with simple treatment. As far as possible, it’s best to continue with your normal everyday activities as soon as you can.

Sometimes, however, back pain can be more persistent, or you may have other symptoms besides pain and stiffness. In this case it’s best to seek medical advice to see if there’s a more serious cause of your pain.

Many people develop back pain for no obvious reason. In fact, research suggests that it’s impossible to identify a specific cause of pain for around 85% of people in the early stages. This type of back pain is described as non-specific or mechanical back pain.

In most people the pain starts quickly but then reduces after a few days or weeks (this is called acute back pain), but for some people pain might last for several weeks or even months and years (this is called chronic back pain). Most people with chronic back pain tend to have good and bad days.
How is the back structured?
The backbone, or spinal column, is one of the strongest parts of the body and provides us with remarkable flexibility and strength (see Figure 1). It's made up of 24 bones (vertebrae), one sitting on top of the other with discs in between and lots of strong ligaments and muscles around them for support. On either side of the backbone, running from top to bottom, are many small joints called the facet joints. The spinal cord lies protected within the backbone. The spinal cord connects to the brain through the base of the skull and to the rest of the body by nerves that pass through spaces between the bones of the spine. These nerves are also known as nerve roots (see Figure 2).

As you grow older, the structures of your spine, such as the joints, discs and ligaments, age as well. The structures remain strong but it's usual for your back to get stiffer as you get older.
Wear and tear of the spine can cause pain as we age, but it isn’t always a problem.

What causes back pain?
Often non-specific back pain doesn’t have one simple cause but may be due to a range of factors, including:
• poor posture
• lack of exercise resulting in stiffening of the spine
• muscle strains or sprains.
As well as the factors listed above, there are also specific conditions which are associated with pain felt in the back. But it’s important to remember that severe pain doesn’t necessarily mean there’s a serious problem. Some common conditions are listed below.

Spondylosis
You may be told that your back pain is due to wear and tear of the spine. This is called spondylosis. As we grow older the discs in the spine become thinner and the spaces between the vertebrae become narrower. Spurs of bone (osteophytes) may form at the edges of the vertebrae and facet joints. All of us have wear and tear as we get older but not all of us have pain. In most cases wear and tear is just part of the normal aging process and not really related to any problems with the spine.

See Arthritis Research UK booklet
What is arthritis?

Sciatica
Back pain is sometimes linked with pain in the legs, and there may be numbness or a tingling feeling. This is called sciatica. This is due to irritation or squeezing of one of the spinal nerves (called the sciatic nerve). For most people who develop sciatica, the leg pain tends to be the most troublesome symptom and they may not have back pain at all.
Pain travels down the leg because of the irritation of the sciatic nerve in the lumbar spine, but there’s actually nothing wrong with the leg itself. In most cases the reason for the nerve irritation is a bulging disc. Discs are designed to bulge so we can move our spines about easily, but sometimes a bulge can ‘catch’ the spinal nerve and cause pain that travels all the way down the leg and foot (see Figure 3). Sciatica is fairly uncommon and fortunately most people recover fairly quickly, although in some cases it might take a number of months. About 60% of all people with sciatica get better within a few weeks to months.
Figure 3
Rupture or bulge of a vertebral disc

Disc herniation – a rupture and/or bulge, pushing on the spinal nerve

Disc

Spinal nerve