

Physio 4 You

Acute low back pain



Acute low back pain refers to pain in the lower back which has lasted for less than 12 weeks. The lower back is the region of the body where the lumbar spine is located. The lumbar spine is the bottom section of the spine and consists of five bones (vertebrae). Between these vertebrae are structures called discs which act as shock

absorbers. There are countless muscles acting on the lumbar spine and a number of strong ligaments which provide the spine with stability. Many of these structures can be involved when you experience acute low back pain.

Lower back pain can unfortunately happen to anyone at any time. Around 70% of Australian adults will experience lower back pain at some point during their life.

What causes back pain?

Acute low back pain can be caused by many factors such as:

- trauma (fall, car accident, lifting)
- muscle imbalances (postural issues)
- existing medical conditions
- rheumatological conditions.

Injuries can happen when you do something new, different or strenuous, such as lifting heavy items or playing a new sport. The pain may also occur because of a build-up of stress on the back that gradually turns into an injury. Although serious causes of back pain are rare, it is important that you have your condition assessed by a qualified health professional such as a physiotherapist. This is particularly important if your back pain is associated with other symptoms like fever, unexplained weight loss, pins and needles or numbness, or if your pain was caused by a high velocity trauma such as a car or sporting accident.



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What should you do?

At the first sign of back pain, there are a few simple things you can do to provide short term relief and give your back the best chance of healing quickly.



- **Stay active:** It may be tempting to stay in bed, it is important to keep moving as much as you comfortably can. By doing this, you can prevent stiffness and relieve muscle spasms. Your physiotherapist can prescribe a gentle exercise program tailored to suit your condition. They can also gradually progress your exercises to help you return to normal function as soon as possible.
- **Use heat:** Heat has been shown to improve pain and function during the first 48 hours of back pain. A few easy options are heat wheat bags and hot water bottles. Make sure you test the heat before you apply it.
- **Find comfortable positions:** Although you should remain as active as possible during the early stages of back pain, there are times when you need to be lying or sitting down. Find positions that allow you the most comfort, especially when sleeping. Using a pillow under the knees when lying on your back and between your knees when lying on your side can offer support and relief from pain. When sitting ensure your lower back is supported. You can use a rolled up towel placed in the small arch of your back. This will help provide support and may relieve the pain.
- **Stay positive:** Back pain is a distressing and disabling condition, but it is important to remember that you will get better. With proper treatment you should regain normal, pain-free movement as well as improving the strength of the key supporting muscles that surround your spine.

How your physio can help

It is important to consult a physiotherapist as soon as possible to assist with pain relief and improve movement. Physiotherapists are experts in the assessment of musculoskeletal injuries, especially back pain. They will provide a thorough examination to ascertain the structures responsible for your pain. The physiotherapist will also be able to give you a better understanding of the cause of pain and further self-management techniques. Your physiotherapist will also discuss the treatment options with you. Some options may include:

- joint mobilisation
- massage
- stretching
- strengthening exercises
- taping
- advice on recommended positions and postures at home and work during.

Treatment of the underlying cause will not only resolve your back pain, but prevent it from coming back again. If you're suffering from back pain, don't delay! The earlier you see a physiotherapist, the quicker they can help get your back pain under control and get you back to work, sport and life.

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Physio In Practice

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It is a common belief that the majority of patients suffering acute (or recent) low back pain will recover fully within 4–6 weeks with or without treatment. Australian Researchers at the George Institute for International Health have shown that this prognosis is not as favourable as claimed.

Therapeutic treatment has been proven to speed up recovery. However the prognosis for these types of patients especially compensation patients is that the recovery time is longer than previously thought. This indicates that Low Back Pain is a significant, often long term, health problem. Indeed, only headache is higher in the complaints department



for neurological conditions. Typically, medication, rest and other modalities are given to assist in acute pain. It is essential that these clients are referred without delay to the appropriate health provider for optimum recovery and to prevent chronicity of the problem.

Exercise has shown to effectively speed up recovery from acute low back pain by regaining range of movement and strengthening the back and abdominal muscles. The research shows that specific muscles such as multifidus do not automatically fully recover after an episode of acute low back pain. This perhaps is one explanation for the slow recovery some people may experience after suffering acute back pain that have not seen a physiotherapist for treatment. Exercise for acute back pain sufferers must be specifically tailored to the individual patient taking into account their diagnosis and clinical presentation.

Exercise needs to be prescribed by a qualified professional who has assessed the back fully and not be in the form of a generalised exercise handout given to all acute back pain patients. Generalised exercise programs can significantly exacerbate these acute patients.



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How can physiotherapy help?

Physiotherapists are highly skilled in assessing, diagnosing and managing the treatment of acute low back pain patients. There is indication that even a small number of physiotherapy sessions of education, management advice, exercise prescription and treatment are enough to show significant pain reduction for the acute patient. Treatment can include and is not limited to:

- joint mobilisation
- soft tissue mobilisation
- taping
- exercise (including stretches and core strengthening)
- acupuncture or dry needling
- traction
- electrical modalities.

Physiotherapists are trained to provide exercise in a controlled, gradual and progressive manner catering for specificity.

Exercise may be prescribed in a variety of ways including:

- home exercise program with individualised progression where appropriate
- hydrotherapy
- individual or small group training.

Physiotherapists are able to assist in speedy recovery of the acute patient who is preferably referred earlier rather than later for treatment.

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Sources

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