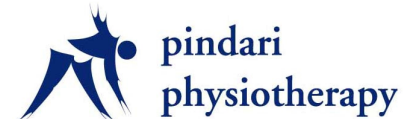


ACUTE BACK PAIN



Acute Back Pain is a broad term describing a variety of lower back injuries, but is usually associated with a "one-off" movement whereby the individual experiences sharp pain in the lower back region, and subsequently may be quite physically disabled.



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Most of the patients treated in this clinic have suffered a disc or ligamentous injury to their back, and for the ease of this section the following advice is generally applicable to those injuries, specifically in the very early stages where you may not be able to get to a Health Professional. It must be noted that every injury is different, particularly in the case of the lower back, and this section is a guide only and by no means a substitute for treatment or advice given by a Health Professional.

In general the prime cause of back pain is the muscle spasm associated with "protecting" the actual injury. If you have suffered a bulging or torn disc, or strained a ligament or joint in your back, there will be an inflammatory response with some swelling and possibly minor bleeding much the same as any sprain. The complication of this injury in the lower back is that the swelling often impinges on the highly sensitive nerve structures of the spinal cord (see Fig 1). This can be extremely painful, and hence your body will adopt a posture to try and offload any pressure on this area, usually a "bent forward" position. It also means that your back muscles will be working "overtime" to help keep you upright, and they are not designed to be working so hard. This is where the "tired and achey" sensation can come from, and may lead to you wanting to sit or lay down all the time as they become tired.

Consequently most early management of these injuries involves trying to take the pressure off the disc or joint so the muscles can relax, and also to allow the disc or joint to heal. In other words.....REST! When you sit or stand and are in a vertical position, there is a deal of compression and loading going through the discs and joints, and they won't get better if you keep applying stress to them (Fig 2). As a result, usually the best way to offload this pressure is to lay down in a horizontal position. However because there is very little room within the spinal cord, it doesn't take a lot of disc or joint swelling to have a painful effect on it, and it can often be quite difficult to find a position of comfort to rest in.

Generally the best way to get comfortable is to find a position where you can take the load off your muscles, and allow them to relax. Your best chance of achieving this is if you are laying on a firm surface such as the floor. If you try the lounge or your bed, you might feel yourself "sinking" into the cushions, and as such won't be able to "trust" that position enough to relax. Of course the floor can be a little uncomfortable too, particularly floorboards, so best to get a doona or a few blankets to provide some cushioning, or better still a yoga mat. It's also a good idea to put a chair nearby to help you get up and down. Make sure the area is comfortable, and you have whatever "supplies" you need nearby, as you'll be spending a bit of time there, and the less times you get up and down the better. Also keep a rolled up towel handy, as it may be useful in providing some support for your back at various times.

Now that you have some understanding of the mechanisms behind Acute Back Injuries, and have your recovery environment set up, try any of the following positions to get comfortable. You can deem yourself to be "comfortable" when you can take a deep breath in, and breathe out and can COMPLETELY relax your back muscles.

The following page details suggested action to take if you are unable to visit your Physiotherapist:

ACUTE BACK PAIN

1

Usually the most comfortable position, try this first.



2

If you can't relax your back, you might need some support underneath it, try a rolled up or folded towel and vary the thickness until it is comfortable.



3

If your back is particularly bad, you may find you need to put your legs up on a chair.



4

If you simply can't tolerate lying on your back, side lying may be your best option. To keep your spine straight, you may need 2 pillows under your head, and put 1 or 2 pillows between your knees to stop your pelvis "twisting".



This position should be comfortable for most backs, and should be used in conjunction with other positions throughout the day. It is also the best way to sleep, and if you have leg pain as well, best to keep that leg on top.

5

If possible you should also try and lay on your front at various stages, as this can help "straighten" the spine. It's also the best position to put ice or heat on.



If you can relax into a flat position that's a good sign, and more than likely you will find it easier to "stand straight" when you get up. Think of this position as an exercise.

6

A pillow under your legs may make this position more tolerable.



7

If you can't "relax" your back, try a few pillows under your pelvis as well.

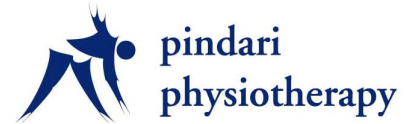


• With all of the above positions, once you feel uncomfortable CHANGE position! Be careful when you start to move, often if you've been in one position for a while it can be hard to get going again, and you might experience some sharp pains.

ACUTE BACK PAIN



Complementary to this acute management is the need to ice or heat up the area. If you have had an acute episode you should ice it as inflammation is involved. Heating an acute back may cause increased swelling. Heat is generally restricted to "stiff" backs where you have had pain for a period of time. You may also find anti-inflammatories or pain killers beneficial, and you should always seek your GP or Pharmacist for this advice.



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In most cases an acute back injury will usually require 1 – 3 days complete rest until you feel comfortable enough to sit or stand for a period of time. Back injuries can be quite serious, and readily become chronic if not managed properly. If you can take the time to manage it well in this early phase, it will make a significant difference to your recovery. Don't be afraid to take time off work, your back will appreciate it!



Once the inflammatory response has been managed, the body will shift into a healing phase. The aim of Physiotherapy is to guide the back through this rehabilitative process to get your full movement and strength back. This will usually involve soft tissue and joint manipulation, stretching and strengthening exercises, and postural or ergonomic advice.

Consequently you should consult a Physiotherapist as soon as possible for treatment.

