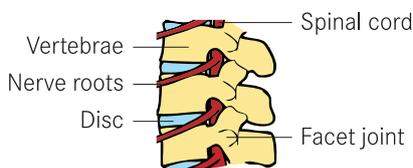## What is back pain?

Irritation or damage to any area of the back muscles, structures or spine can cause back pain. It commonly occurs in the lower back.

The spine consists of many bones called *vertebrae*, which are joined together. Each vertebrae has a pair of *facet joints* joining above and below, and between each pair of vertebrae lies a disc, which acts as a cushion and provides shock absorption.

Muscles and ligaments assist to provide stability to the spine.

What causes back pain?

Back pain is usually caused by an injury to the back such as overstretching during lifting, bending or twisting. This may result in damage to muscles, ligaments or the discs.

Back pain is common and affects most people at some time in their life. Factors that can contribute to back pain include:

• bad work practices and lifting techniques
• poor posture
• being overweight
• lack of exercise
• pregnancy
• stress
• smoking.

Treatment

Treatment depends on the cause. Your doctor or health care professional will have examined you to check for any nerve damage and rule out more serious problems.

X-rays are helpful only in certain cases as they show only bones, and not the soft tissues such as ligaments, discs and nerves. If significant nerve damage is suspected, tests such as a CT scan or MRI might be ordered. Patients with severe injuries may need to see an *orthopaedic* surgeon or *neurosurgeon* for further treatment. This may include injections or, in extreme cases, surgery (an operation).

Most back pain tends to improve within a few days to a few weeks, and a therapist such as a physiotherapist, chiropractor or osteopath can assist with exercises, advice and treatment. Bulging discs and pinched nerves may take longer to heal. Few people require surgery.

Home care

In the first two to three days you should aim to minimise pain and assist healing.

• Wrap ice cubes in a damp tea towel, use frozen peas or a sports ice pack (never apply ice straight onto the skin) and apply to the back for 20 minutes, every one to two hours when awake.
• Avoid 'HARM" – Heat, Alcohol, Re-injury and Massage for the first few days as this will increase inflammation and swelling (even though it may feel good at the time).
• Avoid activities you do not really need to do.
• Sit as little as possible until the pain settles. Avoid extended car travel unless absolutely necessary.
• When resting, lie in a comfortable position, supported by pillows if necessary.
• Keep moving. Walk as much as you feel comfortable doing. Initially this may not be far and may require the use of crutches or a walking frame. Walk regularly and gradually increase the distances.
• Take painkillers when necessary, for example paracetamol (such as *Panadol* or *Dymadon*) or ibuprofen (such as *Nurofen*).
  Codeine is best avoided because it can lead to constipation.
• Physiotherapy as soon as possible after back pain starts can help a faster recovery.

Most back pain improves with time. Do not let pain rule your life. Find other ways to do things that are causing you pain.

How can I prevent back pain?

• Stay active, control your weight, and keep a good posture at all times.
• Do not smoke.
• Do back exercises to keep your back flexible and strong.
• Speak to a physiotherapist.
• When lifting, use your legs and not your back. Hold objects as close to your body as possible and use both arms.
• If working at a desk, make sure it is set up properly so you have a good posture – do not twist, do not look up or down at the computer screen.

Return to the hospital emergency department if you have any of the following:

- loss of control or loss of sensation of bowel or bladder movements
- loss of sensation around the back passage (rectum)
- significant loss of power in your leg movements.

Notes:

Seeking help

In a medical emergency go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health care professional.

For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate

Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Visit a physiotherapist, chiropractor or osteopath.
- Visit the **Better Health Channel** www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au