



Factsheet: Back Pain

About Back Pain

Back pain is the most common orthopaedic complaint and one which can affect anyone at any age. Back pain affects more than 1.1 million people in the UK and 95% of cases involve problems affecting the lower back. Everyone's back pain is different. For some people, it can be just a general ache and soreness, while for others, back pain involves severe pain that hurts all the time, even when resting.

Back pain is generally referred to as acute (usually severe, but short-lived), sub acute or chronic (long-lasting or occurring often). Anything that puts pressure on your back muscles or nerves can cause pain. Any illness or damage to your spine also can cause pain. The cause of most acute back pain is unknown, but is probably due to minor strains, sprains and overuse. Stress, poor posture, lack of exercise and being overweight can all make back pain worse.

Sometimes pain felt in the back actually originates elsewhere in the body, such as with prostate trouble in men, problems with the reproductive organs in women or kidney infections and stones. Other possible causes of back pain include a ruptured intervertebral disc, spinal stenosis, osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, injury or accident, scoliosis or fibromyalgia.

Western Medicine View

There are many causes of back pain according to Western medicine, which often makes it difficult for doctors to find the exact cause of back pain. Muscle spasms, prolapse of lumbar discs, trapped nerves, and overusing the muscles can all cause pain. Being overweight, a smoker or pregnant can increase your risk of back pain. Rarely back pain can be a sign of a more serious condition, such as a spinal fracture or spinal infection. If the cause is unclear, you may be recommended to see a medical specialist for diagnosis.

Most people can be treated with rest, exercise and medication. For some back conditions, the doctor may refer you to another specialist such as an orthopedist, physical or occupational therapist, or surgeon for treatment. Very few people with back pain need surgery.

The most common treatment for severe back pain is bed rest – especially in the most acute phase. Different people require different amounts of rest, but usually, two to three days of staying in bed will be enough to ease the pain. Hot and cold treatments can also help; heat relaxes muscles and soothes painful areas, while cold has a numbing effect that can relieve pain. A doctor may prescribe medication, such as analgesics to relieve pain, muscle relaxants to help relax tight muscles or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs to reduce inflammation. The medication chosen depends on the type of back pain.

In the long term, weight loss and exercises designed to strengthen your back and stomach muscles and to improve your posture can help to keep your back healthy.

Chinese Medicine View

Acupuncture has a proven therapeutic effect on back pain and is listed as an approved treatment by the World Health Organisation (1). The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines on best practice recommend a course of 10 sessions of acupuncture over 12 weeks as a first line treatment for persistent, non-specific low back pain (2).

According to Chinese medicine theory, one of the leading causes of back pain is Qi stagnation. Qi, the body's essential

energy, flows through a network of channels and meridians. Poor posture or injury can lead to a blockage and stagnation of Qi and blood in the back. Left untreated, Qi stagnation can lead to blood stagnation, and what was a dull ache can become a very sharp fixed pain. Another cause of Qi stagnation is the invasion of cold or dampness into the acupuncture channels that go up and down the spine, which slow the flow of Qi and cause pain.

Any specific trauma to the back can give rise to blood stagnation, where blood cannot flow properly through the body. Blood stasis is the local inflammation and bruising that is found at the site of a trauma. Damp heat can cause radiating pain that circles the lower back and down into the groin area, and is often associated with an infection in the urinary tract or other area in the lower abdomen. Lower back pain can be caused by Kidney deficiency.

After making a syndrome diagnosis to determine the cause of your back pain, a trained Chinese medicine practitioner will recommend a course of treatment. Usually, acupuncture is used for pain relief. Treatment may also involve moxibustion (the use of dried herbs burnt close to the skin), Chinese herbs for patients whose system has been unbalanced by the pain and suffering from weakened Kidney and deficiency of Qi in the organ, and electro-acupuncture. Chinese deep tissue massage (Tuina) can also be highly effective in easing back pain.

Evidence for Treatment with Acupuncture

There have been many studies and clinical trials which show that acupuncture has a proven therapeutic effect on back pain. Studies have shown that acupuncture is significantly better than no treatment and at least as good as (if not better than) standard medical care for back pain. Acupuncture has been shown to be particularly useful when used as part of an integrative approach to treatment, for those with severe symptoms and those who wish to avoid pain medication.

Acupuncture can provide pain relief through stimulating nerves in the muscles and other tissues, leading to a release of neurohumoral substances and endorphins, and changing the way pain is processed in the brain and spinal cord. Acupuncture can reduce inflammation and increase local microcirculation to improve muscle stiffness and joint mobility by helping to disperse swelling and bruising. Acupuncture may also help with back pain pregnancy and work related back pain. It can improve the treatment outcome when used in conjunction with conventional treatments. Acupuncture can also reduce the need for medication for pain relief and provide a more cost-effective treatment over a longer period of time, as it can provide more health benefits in terms of patients' quality of life.

The results of sham acupuncture vs acupuncture trials have had more mixed results. In some cases, acupuncture was found to have a significantly superior clinical effect, while in others, the results were not statistically significant. It is important to remember however that sham acupuncture is not an inactive placebo, rather a different version of acupuncture, so their value in evaluating treatment efficacy is highly questionable.

Clinical Trials and Articles

(1) World Health Organisation – Acupuncture: Review and Analysis of Reports on Clinical Trials
<http://apps.who.int/medicinedocs/pdf/s4926e/s4926e.pdf>

(2) The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence – Clinical Guideline 88 - Low back pain
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This factsheet will continue to be updated with new clinical trials and articles as they become available.