Physical Activity and Exercise

- The people who cope best with back pain are those who stay active and get on with life
- Regular sport and exercise has proven to be very valuable in the management of back pain
- Advice is available on what exercises and activities may be suitable

Staying Active

Most people will experience back pain at some stage in their life. Research has shown that one of the most effective methods of managing your back pain is staying active and participating in regular physical activity. Bed rest is not recommended as this will often make the pain worse.

Staying active means that you should continue doing your regular day-to-day activities and avoid becoming sedentary. If the pain is too severe to do this, you can take simple pain killers, such as aspirin, although it is always advisable to consult your GP before taking any medication.

An active lifestyle can be achieved by for example walking or cycling instead of using the car or bus (or get off one stop early and walk the rest), taking the stairs instead of the lift, gardening, housework or any other activity whereby the large muscle groups in your body are active.

In addition to this active lifestyle, you should also participate regularly in sport or exercise. This can be any sport you like, as long as it gives your body a good work-out. Tips for the most effective types of exercise are given below.

Benefits of Regular Exercise

Firstly, you don't have to become an elite sportsman or woman to experience the benefits of exercise. Moderate increases in your fitness are not difficult to achieve and this could immediately have a significant effect on your back pain.

The list of benefits of participating regularly in sport and exercise is almost endless. Depending on the type of exercise, it will make your muscles stronger, increase your flexibility, increase your stamina, improve balance and posture, improve circulation, help keep weight under control, help to lessen fear of movement, improve confidence, enhance sleep and mental alertness and improve your psychological wellbeing.

All the above described effects could help you in the management of back pain. And at the same time, these benefits can help you in preventing heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis and even some types of cancer.

Which Exercises/Activities are suitable?

It is important that you choose a sport or exercise that you enjoy doing, because that will give you a better chance of adhering to your exercise programme. Ideally you should make sure that the sport or exercise of your choice has some endurance elements, some strengthening elements and some flexibility elements. But of course you can do various sports and exercises in a week. Some exercises might be too painful, in which case it is wise to try another type of exercise.

Examples of exercise that combine endurance, strength and flexibility include: running/jogging, cycling, dancing, swimming, hydrotherapy and aquarobics. But other exercise could also be part of a comprehensive exercise programme, such as yoga, tai chi, walking, working out in a gym, and any other sport.

Research has shown that exercise programmes are most effective if performed regularly and over prolonged periods of time. You should aim for at least three to five sessions per week (approx 30-45 minutes per session). but you may wish to build this up over a number of weeks.

It is also noteworthy that many of the above exercises can be done at home without sophisticated equipment.

Research has shown that an individually designed and supervised exercise programme gives the best results. A physiotherapist or exercise professional can help you with this. Alternatively, you can ask your GP for exercise referral schemes in your local area.

Some General Safety Tips:

- Start gently and ensure that you warm up first
- Pace yourself and remember that it is better to do small regular amounts of exercise, rather than a large amount at one time.
- Progress steadily and if you are attending classes, ensure that a qualified Instructor teaches them.
- A comprehensive list of professionals can be found at The Register of Exercise Professionals, Charter House, 29A London Road, Croydon, CRO 2RE Tel: 020 8686 6464 www.exerciseregister.org.
- Before you start participating in vigorous exercise, you are advised to consult your GP

Evidence Base

The evidence reviews by Hayden and colleagues, published in Annals of Internal Medicine on 3rd May 2005, page 765-785: www.annals.org/content /vol142/issue9/

Relevant Information

- BackCare Factsheets - Care for Your Back, Exercises for Office Workers, Back Care for Drivers, Exercise for a better back.
- BackCare Booklets - Active Back Care, Basic Back Care, Back in the Garden.
- Other Publications: 'Treat Your Own Back' by Robin MacKenzie.

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