

Back in the Gym

- ◆ If you regularly work out in the gym advice about keeping active aimed at a more sedentary person may not be detailed enough for you.
- ◆ Warm up and warm down routines, and post exercise rest needs to be tailored to the needs of someone suffering back pain.
- ◆ Where pain is felt and the type of pain is important, and understanding this can help regular exercisers work out for themselves what could help or hinder their recovery.

Exercise is great! It keeps you in shape, lowers your risk of major western lifestyle diseases like heart disease, stroke, obesity and diabetes, is fun and makes you feel good! Exercise in a gym is even better as you can socialise and control exactly what you are doing. When back pain strikes the general advice BackCare gives is to keep active so if you are a regular at the gym you are already on the right track.

People experience back pain in many different ways for many different reasons. Some people suffer greatly and learn to cope with a chronic condition lasting many months or years. For some going to the gym is part of what keeps them and their back well. Others suffer a simple episode of back and/or leg (sciatic) pain and want to know what to do about going to the gym. No one can tell you how to work out with a bad back, or when or whether to stop or restart going to the gym but here is some advice.

Useful tips:

1. A movement, exercise or position that moves pain away from the middle of the back should not be repeated on that day or for a few days. It should then only be repeated if it doesn't cause pain to radiate away from the middle of the back (peripheralise).
2. A movement, exercise or position that causes pain to move towards the centre of the back (centralise), even if it intensifies pain, can be repeated. This is beneficial especially if it also makes the back, pelvis or hip area feel less stiff or restricted.
3. End your warm up and warm down with passive extension exercises (unless this makes your pain move peripherally):
 - Standing: stand with your hands on your hips. Lean back as far as is comfortable then return to standing position. Do this 10 times in up to a minute.
 - Lying: lie on your front with your hands under your shoulders. Straighten arms and push your chest off the floor to cause your back to arch at waist level until the limit of pressure in your low back is reached. Smoothly return to original position. Do this 10 times in up to a minute.
4. Exercise later in the day rather than in the morning as in the morning discs are less thickened and can bulge onto sensitive or weakened tissues.
5. Take care after leaving the gym:
 - Maintain good posture even when tired: Stand or sit tall with the crown of your head up, shoulders back, chin and abdominals in and a small curve (lordosis) in your back at waist level
 - Support good posture while travelling home: use a lumbar roll, rolled coat or towel to support your lordosis in your car or on a bus or train.
 - Support your tired body at home: rest by lying flat on your front or side with cushions under your head and waist. Be aware of your posture when sitting.
 - After an arduous work out, rehydrate and refuel. Avoid those with contagious colds/flu for the first few hours as your immune system is also tired.

6. Learn the difference between different sensations:

- Pain on stretching that resolves immediately once you take the stretching force off, or gradually diminishes to nothing within 20 minutes of a stretch – normal.
- Pain or ache from tired or worked out muscles that is worse when starting movement after inactivity and gradually lessens over a few days – normal.
- Different/new pain that you attribute to back pain not associated with training in the past, that maybe moves around and is unrelated to muscle group use – Caution!

What if my back is too bad for me to go to the gym?

A professional sports person would have a coach to create an alternative exercise programme which takes into consideration their back pain. There may be someone at your gym who can do this for you and has experience helping users with back problems. Ask members of staff and other gym users.

Taking note of the different sensations experienced during exercise (above) you could try activities such as:

- ◆ **Maintaining good un-supported posture all day** – this is quite a workout for key abdominal and back muscles.
- ◆ **Swimming** - try all strokes, at different intensities. The water supports your body weight and you can use floats for hands or between your ankles to work out different parts of your body.
- ◆ **Core stability exercises** - from a video or a class, maybe using a physio ball.
- ◆ **Yoga or Pilates** - join a class with a back pain aware instructor.
- ◆ **Exercise bike at home** - adjust hand grip position to avoid "bad pain" producing positions.
- ◆ **Brisk walking** - possibly with walking/trekking poles to aid cardio work out.

A recent BackCare survey shows that many different types of exercise help people in different ways over the long and short term, so be prepared to experiment.

Relevant Information

- ◆ BackCare Factsheets:
[What To Do When Pain Strikes](#)
[Exercises for a Better Back](#)
[Exercises for Office Workers](#)
- ◆ BackCare Booklets: People's Guide to Active Back care