

ACTIVELY HANDLING- PERSISTENT BACK PAIN



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DEAR PATIENT,

You have been suffering from back pain for some time now. This can be a burden and considerably impair your day-to-day life. However, this is rarely symptomatic of a serious disorder. In addition, there are some steps you can take to alleviate your discomfort.

This information is intended for people with back pain that persists for more than 12 weeks or who run the risk of developing this condition. You will find out here how persistent back pain arises and how it can be treated.

At a glance: persistent back pain

- Back pain is very common. If there are no physical causes necessitating special treatment, the term used for this is *non-specific back pain*.
- Emotional or professional problems can lead to persistent back pain. You should, therefore, inform or talk to your doctor about any pressures in your private or professional life.
- What is important is: staying active in day-to-day life instead of bed rest. Medication can support the treatment. Recourse should be made to medication for as short a period and at as low a dose as possible.
- If, despite treatment, the pain persists, patients should take part in what is known as a *multi-modal treatment programme* that combines various methods.

▶ WHAT IS BACK PAIN?

Back pain is pain in the region of the back below the ribcage and above the buttocks. In most cases, there is no clear reason for the discomfort. The term used by healthcare professionals in these cases is non-specific back pain. There are no signs of a dangerous cause such as damage to vertebral disks or a fractured vertebra.

▶ WHAT CAUSES PERSISTENT BACK PAIN?

Non-specific back pain is normally harmless and goes away on its own. In around 7 out of 100 patients, however, the pain persists. The pain is then described as “chronic”.

Back pain may be caused by several factors. Emotional or professional circumstances and a person’s behaviour may also result in the condition becoming persistent. These include for instance:

- feeling low, stress or anxiety
- wrong protective and avoidance behaviour but also dogged endurance
- heavy physical work or postural distortion
- workplace bullying, job dissatisfaction or unemployment
- smoking, obesity, alcohol and low physical fitness

How a person deals with pain and whether he views this as threatening, will influence how this condition develops.

In the case of non-specific back pain it is not necessary to determine the cause. However, if a person is constantly looking for an explanation, this can also impact the symptoms.

▶ THE EXAMINATION

In the case of persistent pain, your doctor will ask you about your symptoms and your mood. This will include your family and professional situation.

The next step will be to determine whether any changes need to be made to your treatment. In addition, several healthcare professionals may examine you and discuss your further treatment with you.

If necessary, imaging methods such as an x-ray or an MRI may help to rule out any serious causes.

▶ TREATMENT

Non-medication measures

Keeping mobile is the best way of reducing persistent back pain. In contrast, bed rest is harmful. It can even make the pain worse. It's important to keep doing your daily activities.

Relaxation techniques or cognitive behaviour therapy can relieve symptoms. Furthermore, occupational therapy, massages, heat therapy or a back training session may be part of your treatment. Your doctor may offer acupuncture.

Healthcare professionals advise against other methods. They include treatments with cold, electricity, magnets, ultrasound or medical taping.

Medication

If movement is almost impossible, medication may help you to regain mobility in the short term. Healthcare professionals are most likely to recommend *traditional non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)* such as diclofenac, ibuprofen or naproxen.

Multimodal treatment programmes

If your symptoms do not improve, a combination of various methods should be used such as relaxation techniques, movement therapy and psychotherapy. This may be organised as part of multimodal group training, pain therapy or rehabilitation.

Not recommended: Injections and surgery

Healthcare professionals advise against injections with pain-relieving active ingredients or other agents. Spinal surgery is not recommended either if the cause of your pain is unclear. Studies were unable to provide any evidence of their efficacy.

▶ MORE INFORMATION

This Patient Information is based on the **Patient Guideline “Back Pain”**:

www.patienten-information.de/patientenleitlinien/kreuzschmerz

The Patient Guideline was prepared as part of the Programme for National Care Guidelines. It is funded by the German Medical Association (BÄK), the Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians (KBV) and the Working Group of Scientific Medical Societies (AWMF).

Further brief information “Sudden back pain – What can I do?”: www.patienten-information.de

Methodology and sources: www.patienten-information.de/kurzinformationen/chronischer-kreuzschmerz#methodik

Contact to self-help groups

You can find out from NAKOS (national contact and information office for the encouragement and support of self-help groups) where there is a self-help group in your area: www.nakos.de, Tel.: 030 3101 8960

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▶ WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Find out more about back pain. You can read about the treatment recommendations of a group of healthcare professionals in the Patient Guideline “Back Pain”: see box.
- Try to keep doing your daily movements as best you can or return to them gradually.
- Strengthen your core muscles. They support and reduce the pressure on your spine. For instance, swimming or walking are suitable forms of exercise. Ideally, you should try and find an activity that you really enjoy.
- In back training sessions you will learn behaviour that is good for your back as well as specific relaxation or muscle-strengthening exercises.
- Talk to your doctor about possible emotional reasons for your symptoms. It may help if you consider beforehand whether there is something that was worrying you.
- Over-the-counter medication can also have side effects. Ask about the right way to take it.
- Back pain is only rarely caused by something serious. Nonetheless, be on the lookout for additional signs. If, in addition to pain, you experience symptoms of muscle paralysis, numbness or difficulty in passing water or emptying your bowels, consult a doctor immediately. These may be symptoms of a condition that requires immediate attention.

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