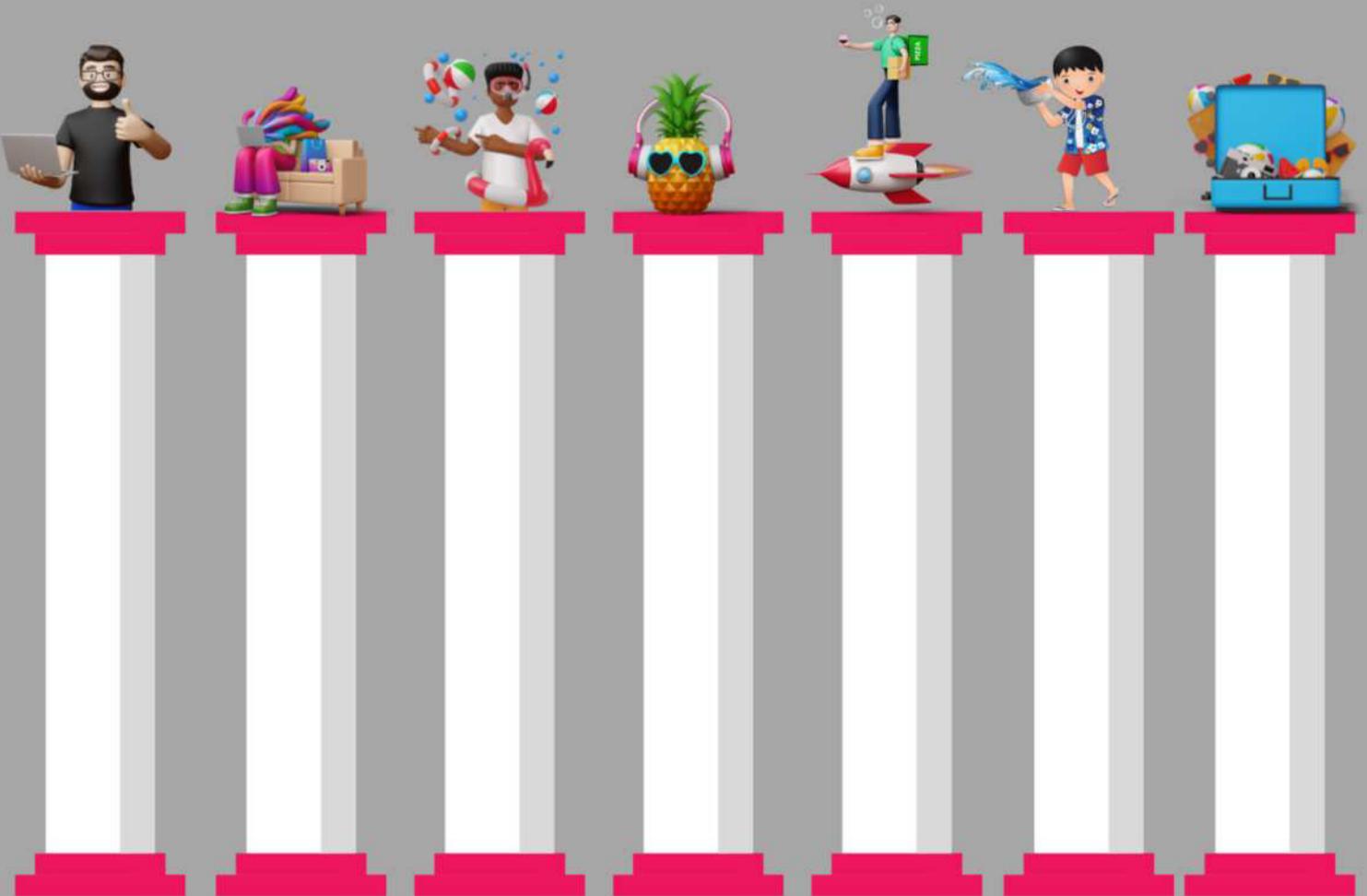




MUSCULOSKELETAL  
AUSTRALIA

# BACK PAIN SELF-CARE PLAN



**A plan to help you understand,  
manage and live well with back pain**

A plan to help you understand, manage and live well  
with back pain

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## What is a self-care plan and how can it help me?

Learning that you have persistent back pain is the beginning of an expedition into unfamiliar territory and you're sure to have dozens of questions swimming around in your head.

You've possibly seen several doctors and other health professionals and may have already trialled various treatments. But where do you fit into this plan? What are the steps that you can take every day to help yourself live an active, healthy and fulfilling life, while managing your pain and other symptoms?

That's exactly where this self-care plan comes in. With the collective wisdom and experience of other people living with back pain, and guided by the latest research, our medical advisors, and Musculoskeletal Australia staff, we've created a plan that puts you at the centre of managing your back pain.

We've designed this plan to put you back in the driver's seat, providing you with the information, tools and support systems you need to become actively involved in managing your back pain.

Years of research and experience have shown that the more involved you can be in understanding and managing your health, the less pain and greater quality of life you'll experience.

This plan will guide you through understanding your condition and its treatments, through to the vital role of exercise, relaxation techniques, as well as adopting healthy eating and sleep habits.

Together these provide practical ways to manage your pain. You'll learn new skills to care for your mental health and wellbeing – helping you to build resilience no matter what back pain and life in general throws at you – and you'll learn how to manage many everyday threats to your health.

While this plan is designed to be a practical resource that puts you at the centre of your care, remember that it doesn't mean all the responsibility for managing back pain rests with you. Your healthcare team and Musculoskeletal Australia are always here for you, ready to provide you with information, guidance and support whenever you need it.

Using your self-care plan: The self-care plan isn't intended to be read from front to back – although you could certainly do that. We think the most helpful way to use it is to dip in, scan the contents and choose where you'd like to start. Each section is its own unique guide with information, hints, tips and links for more information.

Make notes and add your own thoughts, insights and experiences. This is your journey and self-care plan – make it your own. And if you have feedback on how we can improve this plan for others, please let us know.

# 1. Learning about back pain

## Things to remember

- Back pain is a common problem that affects many people from time to time.
- Most of the time it's not the result of a specific condition, illness, or serious damage to the back, and it will usually improve within days or weeks.
- Learning as much as you can about back pain is one of the main steps to managing it as well as you can.
- It's normal to experience a wide range of different thoughts and feelings when you live with back pain. Understanding how these feelings can affect you and your back pain is an important tool for managing your pain in the long term.
- Working with your healthcare team, asking questions, and keeping track of your symptoms and activities helps you to be more actively involved in your healthcare.
- Family and friends and peer support groups can make all the difference in how you cope with back pain.

## Knowledge helps put you in control

Living with and managing back pain well begins with learning as much as you can about it – because the better you understand your back pain, the better you can manage it.

With the right knowledge, you'll be able to ask your healthcare professionals clearer questions, become more involved in decisions about your treatment, understand how your lifestyle, thoughts and feelings affects your symptoms, and therefore play a more active role in managing your back pain.

## Finding out you have back pain

If you've recently been diagnosed with back pain, or you've been living with it for some time, you're probably experiencing a whole range of thoughts and feelings.

You may be feeling frustration, anxiety, fear, sadness and anger, especially if the cause of your back pain isn't clear. You may also be feeling worried about what the future holds, and feel like you have a lot more questions than answers.

It's helpful to know that all of these thoughts and feelings are normal. Sharing how you feel and building a support network around you can help you to cope.

## **Where to get help**

For some people, the intense emotions at the time of diagnosis, or the lack of a diagnosis don't go away. Or you may find that living with back pain continues to cause challenges that affect your mental wellbeing. If these feelings start to dominate your thoughts and affect your ability to do your everyday activities, you should speak with your doctor for support and advice.

Studies show that constantly focusing on back pain (rumination), worrying that things will get worse (magnification) and/or feelings of helplessness can actually make back pain worse and more disabling.

The good news is you can challenge and change these thoughts and feelings. We'll explore this in more detail in the [Mental and physical wellbeing](#) section of this self-care plan, and give you lots of information and links to support your mental wellbeing at any stage of living with back pain.

## **What is back pain and who does it affect?**

Back pain is any pain you feel in your back – from your neck to your buttocks. It's most commonly experienced in the lower (or lumbar) spine.

Back pain may be described as acute or persistent.

Acute back pain usually begins quickly and lasts for a relatively short time. It may be the result of something you did at work or play – e.g. a sudden twisting movement while playing sport, having a fall or accident, or overdoing it in the garden. This kind of back pain is a sprain to the back – like a sprained ankle. In other situations there may be nothing you can identify as the trigger for your pain. This kind of pain is like a headache that can occur when a person is stressed, tired, not sleeping or run down.

Persistent back pain, also called chronic back pain, is pain that lasts for more than three months. Even if pain persists, it doesn't usually mean there's a serious underlying cause or that it can't be treated effectively.

Back pain can affect people at any age, but most often appears during adolescence and increases into early adulthood.

## **Understanding your back**

Your back is an amazing structure – it's strong, flexible, and made for movement. It supports your body and allows you to bend, twist, lift things and get around.

However, when you're in pain, it may not feel strong or flexible. And moving can seem like a bad idea. But it's these sorts of misunderstandings that can make getting on top of your back pain more difficult.

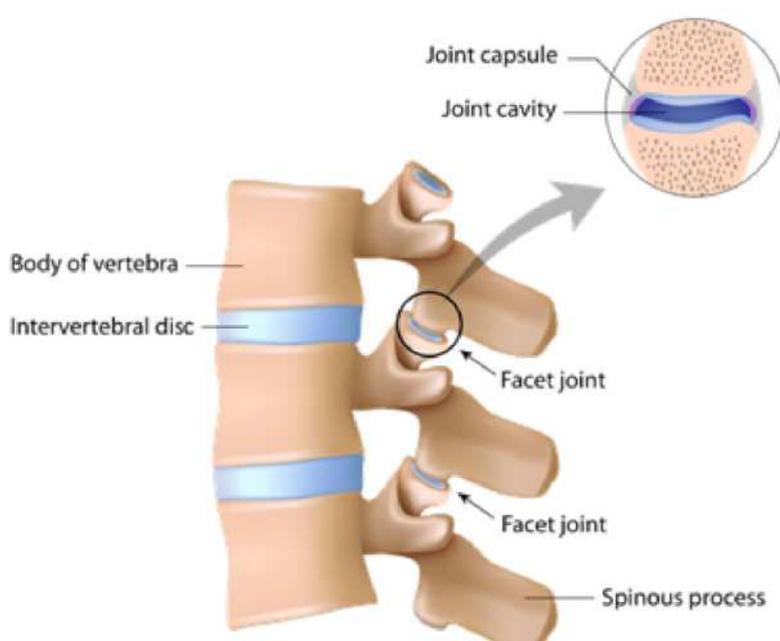
To better understand your back and dispel some of the myths about back pain, let's take a closer look at the back and how it's structured.

Your backbone (spine or spinal column) is made up of bones called vertebrae, stacked on top of each other to form a 'S-shaped column.

The spinal cord, which transports messages to and from the brain and the rest of the body runs down a bony tunnel behind the vertebral bodies, and then feeds out nerves which passes through a hole in each of the vertebrae, where it's protected from damage. It runs through the length of the spinal column.

Each vertebrae is cushioned by spongy tissue called intervertebral discs. These discs act as shock absorbers. Vertebrae are joined together by small joints (facet joints), which allow the vertebrae to slide against each other, enabling you to twist and turn. Tough, flexible bands of soft tissue (ligaments) also holds the spine in position.

Layers of muscle provide structural support and help you move. They're joined to bone by strong tissue (tendons).



The spine is divided into five regions. They are:

- cervical spine (neck): at the top of the spine are 7 vertebrae. Your doctor may sometimes refer to them by letter and number, for example: C1 - the 1st vertebrae in the cervical spine; to C7 – the 7th vertebrae in the cervical spine.
- thoracic spine (middle back): has 12 vertebrae (T1 to T12). This is where your ribs attach to the spine.
- lumbar spine (lower back): has 5 vertebrae (L1 to L5). The lumbar spine connects to the pelvis and bears most of your body's weight, as well as the stress of lifting and carrying items.
- sacrum: is a triangular-shaped bone that connects to the hips. It's made up of the 5 sacral vertebrae (S1 to S5) that are fused together.
- coccyx (tailbone): at the base of your spine are 4 fused vertebrae. Your pelvic floor muscles and ligaments attach here.

As you can see, the structures and soft tissues in your back are tough, flexible and designed to move, carry weight and support you.

That's why we need to trust our backs and understand that even when we feel pain, they're strong and for the majority of people, there's no serious damage or injury.

### **What are the symptoms of back pain?**

The most common symptoms of back pain include:

- pain
- stiffness
- movement limitation
- muscle spasms.

### **What are the causes of back pain?**

In most cases (90%), the cause of back pain isn't known. This is called non-specific back pain. While this name may sound frustratingly vague, the good news is that **most back pain isn't caused by a specific condition, illness, or serious damage to the back.**

Non-specific back pain may be caused by:

- soft tissue sprains and strains
- sensitisation of the spine structures influenced by factors such as:
  - stress
  - anxiety or depression
  - smoking
  - poor sleep
  - lack of exercise
  - sudden or unaccustomed increase in spinal loading - for example, if you're not active (at work or with regular exercise) and you dig up a tree on the weekend, or if you have a sick child and have to lift and carry them much more than usual
  - being overweight or obese
  - being sedentary.

Back pain that has a specific cause is less common (5%). It includes things such as:

- Inflammatory arthritis – spondyloarthropathy and ankylosing spondylitis are two types of arthritis linked to back pain
- bone fracture – e.g. due to an accident or a condition such as osteoporosis
- herniated disc (sometimes called disc protrusion). This occurs when the intervertebral disc becomes weakened, causing it to bulge, sometimes pressing on nerves. However, it doesn't 'slip' or move out of place.

Very rarely (less than 1%) back pain can be a sign of an infection of the spine or cancer. Your GP will look for symptoms and signs associated with these conditions.

There is no evidence that back pain is caused by:

- getting older
- poor posture
- a weak core
- everyday bending and lifting.

These are common myths, and the evidence doesn't support their role in causing back pain. For more information about these and other myths about back pain, check out 10 facts every person should know about back pain or listen to the podcast Empowered beyond pain.

## **The impact of back pain**

Although everyone's experience of living with back pain is different, there are many common factors. It may affect you physically, emotionally, psychologically and/or socially.

Back pain may affect:

- your strength and fitness
- your ability to complete your usual activities at home or work
- your mental health
- social connections
- intimacy
- sleep
- concentration
- your relationships with family, friends, and work mates.

Fear of pain and further injury can also affect the way you normally do things. Concerns about making your back pain worse can affect the way you move and can make you less active. If this continues you can become deconditioned – in other words you lose fitness and muscle strength. Being less active and being fearful of moving your back can also increase the chance that your back pain will continue to persist.

### **More to explore**

- painHEALTH, has lots of [detailed information about back pain](#), including online content, personal stories and videos to access.

### **How is back pain diagnosed?**

In most cases of back pain, it will get better on its own.

However, if your back pain doesn't get better and it's causing you distress or getting in the way of your ability to do your daily activities or work, you should see your doctor.

They will:

- talk with you about your back pain, including potential causes or triggers, if you've had back pain before, things that make your pain worse, things that make it better
- ask about any other symptoms or health issues you have
- do a thorough physical examination.

In most cases of back pain, imaging (e.g. x-rays, CT, or MRI scans) isn't useful or recommended as they aren't good at identifying the cause of pain. They also don't change how your back pain will be managed. A thorough examination by your doctor will decide whether any scans are appropriate.

It's important to know that many scans show 'changes' to your spine that are likely to represent the normal passage of time, not damage to your spine. Many people have changes to their spine (such as arthritis, disc bulges, degeneration) and don't have any pain. Other issues with unnecessary scans are that they're expensive and can expose you to radiation.

However your doctor may send you for tests if:

- after the physical examination and talking with you, they suspect there may be an underlying cause for your pain
- you've had a significant injury or accident (e.g. a bad fall or car accident)
- you have a condition such as osteoporosis, which makes your bones more susceptible to fracture.

For more information about questions to ask your doctor before you get any test, treatment or procedure visit the [Choosing Wisely Australia website](#).

### **When to seek urgent care**

Although it's very rare, back pain can be caused by something more serious. Signs you should be aware of include:

- severe pain that gets worse over time instead of better
- you're generally unwell with your back pain or have a fever
- problems controlling your bladder or bowel
- numbness, pins-and-needles between the legs (saddle area), legs, or feet
- weakness in your legs
- unsteadiness on your feet
- back pain occurring with unexplained weight loss
- redness or swelling on your back.

If you experience these symptoms, contact your doctor, or call the [Healthdirect helpline](#) on 1800 022 222. Registered nurses are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to provide advice when you're not sure what to do — whether to see your GP, manage the condition at home, or go to an emergency department.

## Keeping track of your symptoms

When you go to your medical appointments, do you find it difficult to accurately answer questions about how you've been since your last visit? Your pain levels from day to day, how your stress levels have been, how often you've been exercising, or how you've been sleeping?

When you try to remember, it's very easy to get things wrong. Our memories aren't always reliable, and can be influenced by many other factors, including our emotions.

To help provide your healthcare provider with a clearer picture of what's been happening between visits, it may be helpful to track some of your activities and how they affect your back pain. For example, you might keep track of your exercise program, the quality and quantity of sleep, or your stress levels. This information can be helpful if you're going through a period where your back pain is causing you significant pain and/or affecting your ability to do the things you want and need to do.

To get started, you can simply grab a notebook and start jotting things down, try one of the apps suggested below, or download a blank template. It doesn't matter what you use for your tracking: the most important thing is to collect information that's relevant and useful for you and your healthcare team.

Once you've done your tracking, put it aside. While this information can be helpful when trying to obtain a broad view of your condition over time, focusing too much on your symptoms can be unhelpful and may even make you feel worse. Research has shown that a positive mindset is vital when it comes to managing back pain.

We'll explore this in more detail in the [Mental and physical wellbeing](#) section of this self-care plan and give you lots of information and [links to support your mental wellbeing](#) at any stage of living with back pain.

## Tips for health tracking tools

You might like to try a smartphone app or online tool to keep track of test results, exercise, eating, medicines, symptoms and more:

- Versus Arthritis (UK) has a free [Arthritis Tracker app](#) for iPhone and Android. It was originally designed for teens and young adults, but it's popular with adults too.
- You can also track your activities and symptoms simply by adding them to the free 'Notes' app on your smartphone – where you can also upload and save copies of test results.

- If you'd prefer to keep track of your symptoms on your computer or with pen and paper, try an internet search for a "symptom or activity tracker template". You'll find many free templates that you can either use on your computer or print off and fill in by hand. Or you can simply create your own by recording the information that's important to you.

### **Working with your healthcare team**

Most people with back pain don't need to see their doctor or other healthcare professionals. Their pain usually gets better within a few days or weeks.

However, if your back pain is severe, distressing, persistent, or it keeps coming back, and it's affecting your quality of life and ability to do your everyday activities, help is available.

The team that helps you manage your condition may involve any number of health professionals, depending on your symptoms, other health conditions and the impact back pain is having on your life.

Here are some of the health professionals who work with people with acute and persistent back pain:

#### **Your general practitioner (GP)**

Your GP, also called a family doctor, is an important partner in managing your back pain and is likely to be the healthcare professional you see most often. They can help you to:

- screen you to make sure there is no serious cause for your back
- send you for tests and imaging if indicated
- manage your back pain and other health conditions
- access other health professionals and services – including coordinating your care
- prescribe medicine
- make sure you're up to date with health screens and vaccinations.

#### **Allied healthcare professionals**

**Physiotherapists**, often called physios for short. They'll:

- educate you about your pain
- provide pain relief - using hands on therapies such as massage, relaxation techniques and movement exercises
- provide a graded exercise program to build your confidence to get back to normal function
- help you develop a healthy lifestyle – such as good sleep habits and regular physical activity.

**Specialist musculoskeletal** physiotherapists have gone through additional rigorous training, through the Australian College of Physiotherapists, and offer specialist reviews and management plans for people who have been unresponsive to traditional physiotherapy. They also liaise with physiotherapists to support the care of complex conditions.

**Exercise physiologists**, also called EPs, can help to improve your health and fitness through exercise programs tailored to your specific needs. They can also support you in healthy lifestyle changes.

**Occupational therapists**, or OTs can provide advice on pacing yourself and managing fatigue, as well as how to modify daily activities both at home and work to reduce strain and pain on your back.

**Dietitians** provide information and advice on food and nutrition. They can develop a healthy eating plan for you, helping you to get the different nutrients you need. If needed, a dietitian can also support you to lose weight or to gain weight in a healthy way.

**Psychologists** can help you to work through your feelings, especially if you're feeling you aren't coping or are stressed, anxious or depressed.

Many people with back pain find it helpful to talk with a psychologist about how they're coping with pain and their emotions about living with an unpredictable health condition. A psychologist can provide different types of talking therapies, including cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and can help you to set goals.

**Pharmacists** can help you to understand more about prescription and over-the-counter medicines – and how to use them correctly and safely.

### **How and where can I see these healthcare professionals?**

- **Ask your GP to write you a chronic disease management plan** with the healthcare professionals you need. The plan will include five sessions in a year with these healthcare professionals and Medicare will pay for part of the cost.
- **See a healthcare professional through the public health system** – in public hospitals and in community health centres and rehabilitation services – and at low or no cost. You'll usually need a referral from your GP to access these services and there'll most likely be a waiting list.

- **Book an appointment directly with the healthcare professional of your choice at their private clinic.** You don't need a referral to do this. Private healthcare professionals' fees vary, so always ask what the cost will be when you book your appointment. If you have 'extras' as part of private health insurance, it may pay for part of the cost.

You can ask your GP or call the National Arthritis and Back Pain+ Help Line 1800 263 265 for more info.

### **More to explore**

Here are direct links to professional associations where you can search for a healthcare professional in your local area who has the expertise you need:

- [Find a physio](#)
- [Find an EP](#)
- [Find an occupational therapist](#)
- [Find a dietitian](#)
- [Find a psychologist](#)

### **Tips for getting the most out of your healthcare appointments**

- Write down your questions – and leave space to write down your answers.
- Ask the most important questions first.
- If you have a lot of questions or several issues to address in one appointment, ask to make a double or long appointment.
- You might like to take another family member or a friend to your appointment – they may be able to help you ask questions and to chat with you afterwards about what your healthcare professional said.
- If you don't understand something your healthcare professional has said, ask them to explain it again.
- You generally don't need to make treatment decisions on the spot. If your healthcare professional has suggested a new treatment, it's fine to tell them you need some time to think and talk about it with your family.
- Ask as many questions as you need to about any new treatment your healthcare professional suggests – including the benefits, side effects and costs.

## **Questions to ask your healthcare team**

Sometimes, it can be difficult to know where to start with questions for your healthcare team – especially if you're distressed, and in a lot of pain.

Here are some questions that might help to get you started.

You might like to print this list and add extra questions of your own. Remember, there's no such thing as a silly question!

- What's causing my back pain?
- What can I do to prevent it getting worse or recurring?
- Do I need to have any x-rays or other scans?
- Should I continue to exercise? Or do I need to rest my back?
- What are my treatment options?
- Do I really need this test, treatment or procedure?
- What are the risks?
- Are there simpler, safer options?
- What happens if I don't do anything?
- What are the costs?
- What written information, resources, websites can you give me about my condition and this treatment?
- Can we develop a plan to meet my short- and long-term goals?
- What lifestyle changes can I make to improve my back pain?
- What local healthcare services do you recommend for additional support?

## **Support from your family and friends**

The support of your family and friends can be really important when you have back pain. Research has shown that people who have positive social support cope better with their pain.

To be able to support you, your family and friends will need to learn more about your back pain. They'll also rely on you being honest with them: so, don't be afraid to let them know when you're struggling and need extra help.

It can be helpful for your friends or family to come to your appointments to see how they can assist you.

## Tips for talking to your family and friends about back pain – and asking for help

- Because back pain is so common, some of your family members may have experienced back pain themselves. However not everyone understands immediately that their experience is likely to be very different to your own. This can be frustrating, as they may not understand the impact your pain is having on your life. You might like to email or print parts of this back pain self-care plan to help them understand more.
- It's important that everyone be honest about their feelings. Let your family and friends know how you're feeling – and ask them to share how they're feeling too.
- Let your family and friends know what type of support you'd like from them. It can be difficult to ask for help and it can be difficult for others to know how to offer help – so be as specific as you can. Here are some examples to get you thinking about the type of support you might need and how you could approach these conversations with family and friends:
  - "I'll need extra help cooking dinner because standing at the kitchen bench is really hard on my back after working all day. I thought we could take turns cooking. We could even write up a roster together – how does that sound?"
  - "Gardening isn't easy for me sometimes, and I often strain my back. Is that something you can give me some help with? Or we could find a local gardener to come regularly."
  - "It's more important than ever that I make time for exercise and to relax, especially when I have extra pain. Can we talk about some things you might be able to take off my to-do list to help me free up some time?"
  - "When my pain interrupts my sleep, the combination of pain and being overly tired makes me feel really cranky. Please don't take that personally and try to be extra-patient with me. It will pass soon."
- You may also need to tell family and friends what you don't want help with! If you have set up honest two-way communication from the start, this will be much easier.

### Support from other people with back pain

There's nothing like talking with someone who knows what living with back pain is like. Sometimes you might want to talk with a friend who also lives with arthritis or pain. Or you might want to look into joining a peer support group. They're available all over the country. Some connect through social media and websites, while others meet face-to-face.

If you're interested in online support, you're not just limited to Australian groups. There are some very interesting forums, social media pages and blogs all around the world.

If you find some you like, remember to bookmark their page or join them so that you can get back in touch when you need to.

## More to explore

- Find out more about MSK's network of support groups [here](#).
- Call the National Arthritis and Back Pain+ Help Line on 1800 263 265 to find out more about support groups in your area and that fit with your needs.



## 2. Treatments for back pain

### Things to remember

- Most people don't need treatment for their back pain as it gets better on its own.
- However if you do need help to manage your pain, there are many treatments available so you can live a healthy and active life.
- Exercise and being active is the most effective treatment for managing both acute and persistent back pain.
- For some people with back pain, medicines may be needed in the short term to help you get back to your regular activities.
- Physical or manual therapies may play a role in managing your back pain. They include hands-on therapies to help relieve your pain and stiffness and to improve your mobility, movement and function.
- Many people with back pain are interested in trying complementary therapies. There's not as much evidence for these as for conventional therapies, but the evidence is increasing. Always talk to your doctor before trying any complementary therapy.
- In most cases, the evidence doesn't support the use of surgery to manage back pain.

### There are many effective treatments to help manage back pain

Most people with back pain don't require treatment for their pain, as it'll get better within a few days or weeks.

However, if the pain is affecting your day-to-day life and your ability to do the things you need to do, there are treatments to help you manage your back pain so you can continue to lead a healthy and active life.

Treating back pain requires a whole of body and mind approach - from exercise and remaining active, to having a positive mindset, using relaxation techniques, managing stress, getting enough sleep and in some cases, the short-term use of medicines. The best approach is to use a combination of treatments, rather than relying on a single treatment alone.

### Exercise and remaining active

When you have back pain – either acute pain or a flare-up of persistent back pain - the first thing you want to do is get the pain under control as much as possible. That way you can get back to doing everything you need to do, such as work, family life, social activities.

However you may be surprised to know that the recommended treatment for back pain is not medicines, but exercise and remaining active, in combination with other pain management strategies (e.g. cognitive behavioural therapy, relaxation techniques, heat wraps, massage, pacing yourself). In the case of back pain, movement is medicine.

Although it's quite normal to think you should protect your back from further pain by not moving it, or by resting it, your back is made for movement. And resting it can make things worse.

Exercise will help to reduce pain, relax tense muscles, get strong and keep you moving. It can also improve the fitness of your heart and lungs, increase bone strength, reduce body weight, improve your sleep, energy levels and mental wellbeing.

Choose exercises and activities that you enjoy. You're more likely to exercise regularly if you enjoy what you're doing, and it makes you happy.

Talk with your doctor, physiotherapist or exercise physiologist for more information and advice tailored specifically to your unique situation. And check out the detailed info on exercise in the Back pain needs exercise section of this self-care plan.

### **Managing stress and your emotions**

It's completely natural to feel stress, anxiety and frustration when you live with back pain. However, if you're always fearful or worried about your back pain, it can actually make your pain worse. That's because pain isn't just a physical sensation – it also involves your perceptions, feelings and thoughts.

The worse you think your pain will be, the worse it can feel. It can affect your sleep, you become less active, and you may 'protect' your back by tensing your muscles and moving unnaturally. These feelings, thoughts and behaviours can become a vicious cycle.

Talking with a family member, close friend, or a health professional about how you're feeling can get it out in the open so you can start dealing with these feelings, and hopefully break this cycle.

Strategies such as breathing exercises, cognitive behavioural therapy, meditation, massage, heat, and gentle activity like tai chi, cardiovascular exercise such as walking, swimming, cycling may also help you keep your stress and anxiety under control.

## Sleep

It can often be difficult when you have acute or persistent back pain to get a good night's sleep. Many people who experience back pain have problems: going to sleep, staying asleep or waking too early.

Unfortunately, not getting enough quality sleep lowers your pain threshold. This in turn affects the quality of your sleep. Pain can affect your ability to be active – which also affects your quality of sleep and pain levels. This can make you anxious or stressed – which again can impact your quality of sleep and the amount of pain you experience.

If you're experiencing difficulties with sleep, the good news is there are many things you can do. Start by talking with your doctor. And call our Help Line weekdays on 1800 263 265 and speak with our nurses for information and support.

We also provide a lot of information and tips about sleep in the [Managing your pain](#) section of this self-care plan, so check them out.



## **Medicines**

For some people with back pain, medicines may be needed in the short term to help you get back to your regular activities, especially if the other treatments haven't provided adequate relief.

Medicines can help reduce the pain you're experiencing, but it's important to understand that they may not get rid of your pain completely, especially when you're going about your busy life and doing everyday activities. This doesn't mean your back is damaged.

Pain medicines are available over-the-counter and by prescription. There are several types of medicines that may be used, depending on your situation.

### **Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)**

The most commonly used group of medicine for treating back pain is non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). NSAIDs block the action of specific enzymes (cyclooxygenase or COX) that are involved in inflammation. However, COX also protects the lining of your stomach and intestines. That means that when taking NSAIDs you may experience stomach problems – pain, nausea, diarrhoea, ulcers. This risk is increased if you take NSAIDs frequently, if you have a history of stomach ulcers, if you're over 65, and if you take other medicines that interact with NSAIDs.

Before you start taking NSAIDs discuss it with your doctor or pharmacist to make sure it's safe for you to do so. And always take medicines at the recommended dose and as prescribed.

NSAIDs are available as tablets or pills, and as a topical cream or gel. They can be bought over the counter at pharmacies and supermarkets, or they may be prescribed by your doctor.

### **Topicals**

Some quick and temporary forms of pain relief are rubs, gels, ointments, sprays, and creams that are applied directly to your skin (topically). There are a lot of them available, in many different forms and using different ingredients.

Be careful when using topicals that you read the instructions carefully, wash your hands thoroughly and avoid contact with your eyes and other sensitive areas.

If you're not sure where to start with topicals, talk with your doctor or pharmacist for advice.

## **Paracetamol**

Research has shown that paracetamol has no effect on back pain – both acute and persistent.

## **Opioids**

Although opioids have been commonly prescribed to treat back pain, there's no evidence that they provide any greater benefit than NSAIDs for acute back pain. They may provide some short-term relief for people with persistent back pain, however there's no evidence of long-term benefit

Opioids have a high risk of serious side effects and the potential to cause harm. They also produce physical dependence over time and have the potential to cause addiction. For these reasons, opioids should be used cautiously. Before prescribing an opioid you and your doctor will discuss the risks and benefits for you.

Read the Choosing Wisely Australia patient guide '[5 Questions to ask about using opioids for back pain or osteoarthritis](#)' for more info about opioids.

## **Muscle relaxants**

For people with persistent back pain, there's no evidence that using muscle relaxants will provide any benefit. They may help reduce pain and muscle tension in people with acute back pain when used for a short period. However muscle relaxants have significant side effects, including drowsiness, increased risk of falls, dizziness and dependency, which may outweigh the benefits of using them. Discuss the risks and benefits of using them with your doctor.

## **Keeping track**

When you live with a musculoskeletal condition/s and take medicines – whether it's regularly or occasionally - it's a good idea to keep a record of what you're taking, when, the dosage and any side effects. You can write this down in a notebook, or download an app from the [National Prescribing Service](#). Having this record is useful for when you visit your doctor, so that you can discuss any issues you may have been having. It's also a good idea if you're taking multiple medicines for one or more health conditions.

## **Side effects of medicines**

All medicines have possible side effects. They can vary a lot from person to person and may be mild or more serious.

Knowing about the possible side effects and talking openly about these with your doctor can help you to plan together and quickly get on top of any that you experience.

Ask your doctor about the more common side effects with your medicine and what you should do if you experience any of these.

## **How we can help**

You can call the National Arthritis and Back Pain+ Help Line and speak to one of our nurses to learn more about treatments for back pain and ask questions about your treatment.

Call 1800 263 265 or email [helpline@msk.org.au](mailto:helpline@msk.org.au).

## **More to explore**

- [NPS MedicineWise](#) provides information to help you make the best decisions about your medicines. You can search the 'Medicine Finder' for information on prescription and over-the-counter medicines – or call 1300 MEDICINE (1300 644 424) for more information on your medicines.

## Physical therapies

Physical or manual therapies can help you manage your back pain.

These therapies use a hands-on approach to help relieve your pain and stiffness and to improve your mobility and movement.

The most common of these include physiotherapy, myotherapy, chiropractic, massage, occupational therapy and osteopathy.

It's important to know that relying on passive therapies (people doing things to you) provides only short-term changes. The best treatments teach you how to take control over your health so you can effectively self-manage your condition.

### More to explore

- You can read more about many of these different types of therapies in Section 1 of this self-care plan under Working with your healthcare team or in the separate MSK blog Physical or manual therapies.

### How a GP chronic disease management plan can help

You may have heard people talking about having a management plan from their GP to help manage a chronic health condition like persistent back pain.

These plans include five visits a year to other healthcare professionals – like a physio, exercise physiologist or dietitian - and Medicare will pay for part of the cost. These five visits may be to one healthcare professional or be spread between several professionals.

If you're interested in this service, book an appointment with your GP and let the receptionist know you want to create a chronic care plan. You'll usually need a long or double appointment to do this.

## **Complementary therapies**

Complementary therapies include a wide range of medicines, products or practices that are not currently considered conventional or mainstream medical treatment.

These therapies include acupuncture, meditation, massage, supplements, herbal medicines, aromatherapy and naturopathy.

Complementary therapies are widely used by people with musculoskeletal conditions, including people with back pain to help:

- manage symptoms such as pain
- deal with anxiety and stress
- with sleep
- feel in control of their own health.

While many people feel that using complementary therapies benefits their health and wellbeing, there isn't as much evidence to support their use for back pain as there is for treatments such as exercise, remaining active, getting good quality sleep, and managing stress and anxiety.

For many complementary therapies, there aren't enough well-designed randomised controlled trials to show whether or not they are effective.

But it's true that some types of complementary treatments show promise and may be helpful for managing some of the symptoms of back pain. More and more research is now focusing on these therapies, but because the evidence is still lacking, it's wise to be cautious.

If you're interested in using any complementary therapy, it's important to remember that they may have side effects and they can interact with your other treatments. That's why it's so important to talk with your doctor about any complementary therapies you're interested in trying.

## **More to explore**

Our article [Do your research](#) includes detailed tips to consider before starting a new complementary therapy, including helpful suggestions for doing your research and questions to ask.

- The US National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, National Institutes of Health, provides information on the current evidence of the [effectiveness of complementary therapies for low back pain](#), including treatments such as acupuncture, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga and more.
- Our information on [Complementary and alternative treatments](#) includes brief information about many of the popular types of complementary therapies and links to professional associations for their therapists.
- The Cochrane Library, [Back and Neck Group](#), has many systematic reviews on different treatments used for back and neck pain, including complementary therapies.

## **Surgery**

In most cases, the evidence doesn't support the use of surgery to treat persistent back pain. If your doctor does suggest back surgery as an option, ask questions so you can make an informed choice. Choosing Wisely Australia has [5 questions to ask your doctor or healthcare provider](#) that can help you get started.

And remember, if you're not sure about surgery or don't feel comfortable about the information from the surgeon, ask your doctor to refer you to another surgeon for a second opinion.

## **More to explore**

- MSK's article [Surgery and musculoskeletal conditions](#) includes information about some of the more common types of surgery used for musculoskeletal conditions. It also covers what to discuss with your surgeon, getting ready for surgery, recovering from surgery, and the possible costs.



## 3. Back pain needs exercise

### Things to remember

- Exercise and being physically active is one of the most important things you can do to manage your back pain. It can help to improve pain, strengthen your back and increase your flexibility – as well as boosting your mood and overall wellbeing.
- It's ideal to enjoy different exercises that help you to increase flexibility, strength, and overall fitness. Exercises like swimming, tai chi and walking can help with all of these at the same time.
- Making an exercise plan can help you to keep track, stay motivated and see how exercise helps you manage symptoms. A physiotherapist or exercise physiologist can give you support and information if you're not sure where to start.
- It's also important to find the right balance between exercise and rest – and to know when you're doing too much. Starting with gentle exercises and gradually increasing the intensity and time spent exercising is the best strategy.
- It can be more fun to exercise with friends, in a group or as part of a team. We can help you to find a class, group or centre that suits you.

### Why exercise is important for back pain

It's understandable that you might feel anxious about exercise when you have back pain. You might be worried about damaging your back or causing more pain.

That's why it's good to know that being physically active can help improve your pain, relax tense muscles, strengthen your back, and increase your flexibility. However not being active can increase your pain and stiffness, and weaken your back.

Being active is also important for your overall good health and wellbeing. It helps keep your muscles, bones and joints strong so that you can keep moving. It reduces your risk of developing other conditions such as heart disease, osteoporosis, diabetes and some forms of cancer. It boosts your mood, benefits your mental health, helps with weight control and improves sleep.

### Different types of exercise for back pain

There are many different types of exercise to choose from. The type that will be best for you will depend on what you enjoy and suits your lifestyle, the severity of your symptoms, and whether or not you have other musculoskeletal conditions or health issues.

If you aren't sure which exercises are suitable for you, be guided by your doctor or other health professional, such as a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist. They can provide you with support, information and advice tailored to your needs.

It's ideal if you can do some form of exercise every day.

The exercises you choose should ideally help with:

- **flexibility** – to help maintain or improve the flexibility of your back and body overall
- **strength** – to strengthen the muscles that support your back, improve your bone health and improve your ability to perform daily tasks
- **overall fitness** – exercise that gets you moving and increases your heart rate - like brisk walking, swimming or cycling - will help improve your heart and lung health and can also help with endurance, weight loss, and preventing other health problems like diabetes. This type of exercise is also called aerobic exercise, cardiovascular exercise, or 'cardio'.

It's handy that there are many types of exercise that can help with your flexibility, strength, and overall fitness all at the same time. They include:

- swimming or water exercise classes
- tai chi
- brisk walking, jogging or running
- cycling
- yoga
- Pilates
- aerobics
- strength training.

Choose activities that you enjoy, are committed to doing, and that fit with your lifestyle and experience of back pain. These exercises need to become part of your everyday routine, even after your back pain has eased. If you stop exercising when you feel better, you'll run the risk of losing all the improvements you made, and for your back pain to return.

### **Pain and exercise**

It's common when you first start exercising to feel a bit sore. This doesn't mean you've hurt or damaged your back. Start with regular and small amounts of exercise, and gradually increase it over time.

Your back will become stronger and more flexible – it will just take a little time and perseverance. And if the pain is affecting your ability to exercise, talk with your doctor or pharmacist about the short-term use of pain-relieving medicines before exercise.

**Make an exercise plan and keep track.**

You’ll find it’s easier to exercise regularly if you plan it. It’s very easy for life to get in the way – work, family, social activities, household chores - and exercise is often the casualty.

You can create a simple chart with the days of the week, the types of exercise you’ll do, and how long you’ll exercise for. There are many ways you can record this information: you might like to keep the chart on your computer desktop, write it down in a notebook, or use a health and exercise [tracking app](#).

<b>Day</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Exercise</b>	<b>How long</b>
Sunday	3pm	Walking the dog with the kids	45 minutes
Monday	6pm	Aqua aerobics class after work	1 hour
Tuesday	7am	Stretching exercises at home	30 minutes
Wednesday	12.30pm	Lunchtime walk with workmates	30 minutes
Thursday	6.30pm	Online yoga class	30 minutes
Friday		Rest day	
Saturday	9am	Walk to and from the supermarket	1 hour

You might also find it useful to jot down some notes about how you felt after being active: Did your pain improve? Did you feel your mood lift? Or did you over-do it?

These notes can help you to better manage your back pain, see how it responds to exercise and how you might want to adapt your plans. If you're working with a physio or exercise physiologist, this information can provide them with useful feedback to help them fine-tune your exercise plan.

### **The feel-good chemicals released by exercise**

When you exercise, your body releases chemicals such as endorphins, serotonin and dopamine into your bloodstream.

They're sometimes called 'feel-good' chemicals because they boost your mood and make you feel good.

These chemicals also interact with receptors in your brain and 'turn down the volume' on your pain system.

More good reasons to keep active!



## How to find an exercise class, group or centre that suits you

It's often helpful to exercise with friends, in a group, or as part of a team – especially if you find it difficult to get motivated.

As a bonus, some organised exercise classes are run by physios, exercise physiologists or others who are aware of any special considerations needed for people who have back pain.

Try these sources to find an exercise class, group or centre that suits you:

- Neighbourhood houses and community centres are ideal starting points to find exercise options close to you. Visit the Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association [Members page](#) to find your state or territory's website, where you can then search for local houses or centres and find exercise programs they offer.
- Local councils are also a good source of information about exercise programs. Go to your local council's website and search 'exercise classes' to see what they offer.
- Some larger gyms and physio centres have heated indoor swimming pools where you can swim laps or join a warm water exercise class. You can also search online for classes held at community swimming centres.
- Walking groups are a fun way to get active, meet new people and socialise. The Heart Foundation has over 1200 walking groups around Australia, you can search for one close to you [here](#).
- [parkruns](#) are free, weekly community events are held all around the world with 5km walks and runs in parks and open spaces on Saturday mornings. Everyone is welcome, there are no time limits, and no one finishes last!
- The National Arthritis and Back Pain+ Help Line 1800 263 265 can tell you more about exercise classes or groups in your area.
- There are lots of free exercise apps, YouTube channels and websites with free online exercise programs. These can be especially helpful when you need or prefer to exercise from home. Enjoy searching these to find something that fits with your needs.

## Tips for getting started with exercise

If you haven't been active for a while, you might not know where to start with an exercise program. Don't worry once you find the right activities and support, you'll find it easier and reap the benefits.

Here are some tips for getting started:

- Check with your doctor before starting an exercise program.

- If possible, see a physio or exercise physiologist for advice about specific exercises. They can suggest safe exercises tailored for you and make sure you're doing them correctly, so you don't cause an injury.
- Always build up slowly. When you first start, do less than you think you'll be able to manage. If you cope well, do a little bit more next time and keep building up gradually.
- You may feel a bit sore the first few times you try a new activity. As you get used to it, this will usually get better.
- If one type of exercise always causes a flare-up of your back pain, you might need to find a different type of exercise.

### **More to explore**

- MSK's information sheet [Exercise for musculoskeletal conditions](#) includes more information about exercising in water and tai chi, as well as some helpful exercise cautions and suggestions.
- Read MSK's detailed article on [water exercise](#) and all its benefits.
- The MSK article on [incidental exercise](#) includes lots of clever tips for sneaking extra exercise into your day.
- Versus Arthritis (UK) has [written information and a video on exercises](#) for the neck and back.



## 4. Healthy eating when you have back pain

### Things to remember

- Eating a wide range of healthy, unprocessed foods can help you to feel as well as possible.
- This includes eating plenty of vegetables, fruits, wholegrains, legumes and beans, lean meat/ tofu, along with nuts, seeds, fish and oil.
- Sometimes when you're in pain, it can be difficult to prepare food and eat well. We have lots of tips that can help.
- If you're overweight, losing weight can help to take pressure off your spine, relieve your pain and improve your overall health and wellbeing. There's no need to try and lose weight on your own – there are healthcare professionals to support you. What is the best eating plan for back pain?

### What is the best eating plan for back pain?

Your body works best when you eat a wide range of healthy foods.

Most people find that they feel better overall if they enjoy a balanced eating plan filled with fresh, unprocessed foods, while limiting processed, fatty, salty and sugary foods. Eating in this way has many benefits, including helping you to maintain a healthy weight.

This is important if you have back pain.

### What does this type of eating plan look like?

A healthy eating plan looks a lot like a typical Mediterranean diet and includes:

- foods that are as unprocessed as possible
- a rainbow of fresh whole vegetables and fruits (not juices),
- wholegrains like brown, black or red rice, quinoa, buckwheat, oats, as well as whole grain breads and pastas
- legumes like chickpeas, lentils, cannellini, red kidney and other beans
- raw, unsalted nuts and seeds
- fish, seafood, poultry and tofu
- healthy oils such as olive and flaxseed.

This type of eating generally includes eating less:

- red meat
- foods high in sugar, salt and fat

- highly processed foods.
- drinking less alcohol and sugar drinks.
- Eating in this balanced way and drinking enough water can help you to:
  - keep up your energy levels
  - maintain your weight
  - sleep better
  - improve your mood
  - have a greater overall sense of wellbeing
  - prevent other health problems, like heart disease and diabetes.

And all of these effects may help to improve your symptoms – such as pain and stiffness.

### More to explore

- The type of eating plan we've described is sometimes called an anti-inflammatory diet. MSK has written an [article](#) about anti-inflammatory diets, the evidence for them and tips to move your eating plan in this direction.
- MSK's [Handy tips for eating well with arthritis](#) includes helpful tips for keeping your eating plan in balance.
- For healthy meal ideas, have a look at MSK's [Healthy meals on a budget](#) and [recipes](#).
- Arthritis Foundation's [The ultimate arthritis diet](#) looks at the different parts of the Mediterranean diet and how they may benefit joint health.
- If you need help in making changes to your daily eating, it's a good idea to chat with an [accredited practising dietitian](#).

Always chat to your doctor or dietitian if you're thinking of making any major changes to your eating plan.

Big changes to your diet, for example, eating a lot more or a lot less of one type of food or significantly restricting your kilojoules, can lead to imbalanced eating and may mean you're getting too much or not enough of certain nutrients. Your doctor or dietitian can help you safely make changes to your eating plan and ensure you're getting all the nutrients you need.

Some supplements may interact with your prescribed medicines. Speak with your doctor or pharmacist before taking any new supplements.

## Keeping to a healthy weight

Your spine supports your weight as you walk and move around. When you're carrying extra weight, this adds additional load to your spine. That's why keeping to a healthy weight and losing weight if you need to makes good sense when you have back pain.

The amount of overall fat you carry is also important, because fat releases molecules that contribute to low but persistent levels of inflammation across your whole body.

Carrying extra weight can lead to a bit of a vicious cycle when you have back pain: extra weight can increase the pain you experience. Being in pain may then affect your ability to be as active as you'd like. This can make your pain worse and may lead to more weight gain. It can also be difficult to be more active when you're overweight, which can also lead to increased pain and weight gain.

As well as directly affecting your back pain, there are many other long-term health problems, like heart disease and diabetes that are linked to being overweight.

To lose weight, you'll need to:

- set a realistic goal
- create a healthy eating plan that supports your weight loss goal, your health needs, and fits with your lifestyle (big hint: 'diets' are not the way to do this!)
- learn new ways of being active and build this into your everyday life
- find the right healthcare professionals to support you.

Losing and maintaining healthy weight does take work and can sometimes be difficult to do, but the results in improved wellbeing and reduced pain are well worth it.

If you need help to lose weight, talk with your doctor or dietitian about how you can do it safely, and so the results last for you.

## More to explore

- We've written lots of helpful articles on losing weight when you have a musculoskeletal condition, here are a few to explore:
  - Handy hints for eating well
  - Setting goals – Using SMART goals and weight loss as a practical example
  - Losing the COVID kilos
- Better Health Channel's Weight loss – a healthy approach is designed to help you make small, achievable changes to your lifestyle that can help you to lose weight the healthy way.

## **What about omega-3 fats?**

You may have heard people talking about omega-3 fats (often called omega-3 fatty acids, or simply omega-3s) for joint, heart and brain health.

Foods and some supplements rich in omega-3 fats have been shown to help reduce inflammation and may help reduce pain. It's important to note that these studies have not focused on back pain specifically but have looked at conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis and chronic pain.

Omega-3s don't reduce inflammation as much as medicines, but when you eat them through food sources, they don't have side effects and may have other health benefits, like reducing the risk of heart disease and improving depression.

So, you may choose to add a few servings of omega-3-rich foods to your weekly eating plan. Foods rich in omega-3s include:

- oily fish and seafood including salmon, tuna, mackerel, sardines, anchovies and oysters
- flaxseeds and flaxseed oil (also called linseeds and linseed oil)
- chia seeds
- walnuts
- foods that fortified with omega-3s, including some dairy products, eggs, and margarines.

## **Fish oil supplements**

Fish oil supplements are also a rich source of omega-3 fats.

Remember to talk to your doctor before taking any supplements to make sure you're taking the correct dose for your needs and to make sure it won't interfere with any other medicines you're taking.

It's also important that you don't confuse fish oils with fish liver oils – like cod liver oil and halibut liver oil. Fish liver oils contain vitamin A, which can cause serious side effects when you have large amounts.

If you're interested in omega-3s, talk with your doctor, dietitian, or pharmacist for more information.

## Tips for healthy eating

- Have a regular schedule around your eating, e.g. eating moderate amounts at set times in the day will give you a steady energy level throughout the day.
- Go grocery shopping when you're feeling well and energised. And be sure to shop when you're not hungry, so you make good food choices.
- Ask for advice from your doctor or a dietitian about the right foods to eat, especially the foods that may or may not go well with certain medications.
- If you need help with your diet, include a dietitian as part of the allied health visits within your chronic disease management plan (if you have one). If you don't have one, discuss your options with your doctor.

## What to do when you don't feel like cooking or eating

Sometimes, when you're experiencing severe pain, it can make it difficult to eat enough and to eat well.

Research shows that during periods of intense pain, most people report eating less. Some people also lose their appetite or feel nauseous as a side effect of some medicines.

Pain and fatigue may also make it difficult for you to shop for healthy food and prepare well-balanced meals, instead choosing the quick and easy option of takeaway food or convenience meals, which are often high in fat, sugar and/or salt.

If your appetite is low for some time, it can affect your health. You may miss out on nutrients you need, become underweight and affect your immune function, making it harder for your body to fight infections.

Knowing that you might lose your appetite from time to time can help you plan ahead:

- **Ask for advice.** If you need help planning meals, or finding simple ways to prepare nutritious meals, meet with a dietitian for information and advice.
- **Prepare meals in advance.** When your pain is under control, take some time to make extra meals that you can freeze for the times you need them. This way you'll be eating meals that you know are healthy and that you enjoy.
- **Look up options for healthy food delivery services** and consider using one of these for a short time when your back pain is severe.

- **Talk with your doctor about supplements.** You may need a supplement if you can't get enough of some nutrients through your eating plan or if you have a deficiency. Your doctor is the best person to advise you on this.

## Tips for low-effort meals

There are lots of healthy ingredients you can stock up on and store in your pantry or freezer to make low-effort meals easier when pain and fatigue make it difficult to cook. Here are some simple ingredients and ideas to try:

- **Canned sardines** (a great source of omega-3 fatty acids, protein and calcium) on wholegrain toast with a simple side salad.
- **Low-salt baked beans** served on a baked potato or baked sweet potato.
- **Frozen veggie burgers** cooked and served in a wholemeal pita bread pocket with any of your favourite burger toppings (try beetroot, sliced tomato and crunchy lettuce).
- **Canned chickpeas or other beans and canned chopped tomatoes**, simmered with veggie stock and any veggies you have on hand to make a quick minestrone.
- **Free-range eggs** (which usually keep well in the fridge for weeks) scrambled, boiled or poached and served on top of wholegrain toast and baby spinach with some sliced avocado on the side.

## More to explore

- MSK's article [Now we're cooking!](#) includes lots of tips for preparing meals with less stress when you have a chronic illness.
- Try any of these [17 healthy no-prep recipes](#) for the days when you just can't.
- Versus Arthritis' [Five easy ways to eat well with arthritis](#) includes some great tips and quick recipes for a super-simple breakfast, lunch and dinner.

## 5. Managing your pain

### Things to remember

- Experimenting with and finding new ways to manage ongoing pain is an essential part of your back pain self-care plan.
- Your treatment plan, staying active and eating well will all contribute to managing your pain and staying healthy. And there are lots of additional strategies and tools you can use as well: from soothing heat and cold to getting absorbed in activities that distract you from pain.
- Learning to balance activity and rest using a strategy called pacing can help to reduce your risk of pain, flares and fatigue.
- Poor sleep, fatigue and pain are closely tied together, with each one making the other worse. Learning to break this cycle will give you significant relief.
- Pain flare-ups are part of the unpredictable nature of back pain. Having a plan to manage them can help put you back in control.
- Setting clear goals gives you something to aim for – and the steps you take towards your goals can help you manage your pain better. Our step-by-step guide will show you how.

### Living well with ongoing pain

Experiencing and managing pain is a major part of living with back pain and an important part of your self-care plan.

When you live with back pain, it can affect your daily activities and work, exercise choices, sleep, energy levels, mood and relationships. In turn, these effects can then increase your experience of pain.

For example, ongoing pain can make it difficult for you to sleep, which can make you feel more fatigued during the day. When you're more fatigued, your pain may feel worse and limit your activities more than usual.

Over time, if it's not well-managed, living with back pain can have longer-lasting effects on your mood, self-confidence, and sense of wellbeing.

The good news is that there are many simple, practical ways to manage your pain and its impact on your life.

Having plenty of different strategies and tools that you can turn to when you need them can help give you more control and make life with back pain easier to manage.

These tools will take some time and effort from you: but you'll soon see the rewards are well worth it.

### **More to explore**

- MSK's booklet [Managing Your Pain](#) provides an A-Z kit of pain management tools that you can dip into whenever you need them. It includes lots of practical suggestions that you can easily try out to see if they work for you. Some of the tools in the booklet are covered in this section, and there are many more in the booklet.
- You'll also find that a lot of the info in Section 6: [Your mental and physical wellbeing](#), like mindfulness and using relaxation techniques, can help to manage your pain.

### **Factors that contribute to persistent back pain**

As you learned in section 1 of this self-care plan, in most cases, the cause of back pain isn't known. But the good news is that most back pain isn't caused by a specific condition, illness, or serious damage to the back.

However, there are things that you may do that could be contributing to your back pain. Learning about these things, and how you can change them, can help you manage your back pain more effectively. These things include:

- Too much rest or inactivity. Your back is made to move, so exercise and movement are extremely important. Even though you may feel like you need to protect your back and not move too much, exercise actually makes your back stronger and healthier.
- Protecting or guarding your back. As mentioned above, movement and exercise are vital for managing back pain. But this movement needs to be natural, not stiff or tense. This can be challenging when you're dealing with back pain, but the more relaxed and natural your movements are, and the less you protect or guard your back, the better your back pain will be. So, when you feel yourself tensing your back muscles, or moving stiffly, stop, breathe deeply, and relax your body.
- Negative feelings about your pain. When you live with back pain, and it disrupts your life, feeling some fear, worry or anxiety is natural. However if these feelings persist, and are constantly at the front of your mind, they can get in the way of recovery. Talking with someone - a family member, close friend or a [health professional](#) - can help you deal with these feelings.
- Poor sleep. Not getting enough good quality sleep can affect your pain levels, muscle tension and anxiety levels. But there are lots of things you can do to improve your sleep quality. Read our [information on sleep](#) to find out more.

- Stress. Constant, high-levels of stress can make your muscles become tense, and aggravate your pain. When you're feeling stressed, try some [relaxation strategies](#) such as [focused and controlled breathing](#), [mindfulness meditation](#), [listening to music](#) or going for a walk. And talk with a professional, such as your doctor or psychologist, if you're regularly finding it difficult to keep your stress under control.
- Smoking. As well as the obvious links to cancer and lung disease, smoking is linked to developing back pain. Smoking also makes it more difficult to manage your pain. It causes fatigue and slower healing, which can make your pain worse. So quitting has many health benefits. Within weeks of quitting, you'll breathe easier and have more energy, making it easier to be active and do day-to-day activities.

### **More to explore**

When you understand some of the factors that contribute to persistent back pain, it can help you to see your pain differently.

You might like to have a look at:

- [Pain, the brain and your amazing protectometer](#) – presented by Professor Lorimer Moseley.
- [Treating pain using the brain](#) – presented by Adjunct Associate Professor David Butler.
- [Making sense of disabling low back pain](#) – presented by Professor Peter O'Sullivan.
- MSK's information resource [Persistent pain](#).
- Versus Arthritis' [Managing your pain](#).

### **Medicines**

For some people with back pain, medicines may be needed in the short term to help you get back to your regular activities, especially if other treatments haven't provided adequate relief.

Medicines can help reduce the pain you're experiencing, but it's important to understand that they may not get rid of your pain completely, especially when you're going about your busy life and doing everyday activities. This doesn't mean your back is damaged.

Also remember that medicines are just one part of your pain management tool kit, and they'll have the most benefits when you're able to combine them with other strategies like exercise, distraction, relaxation, healthy eating and getting a good night's sleep.

## More to explore

- Section 2 of this self-care plan: [Treatments for back pain](#) includes an overview of the medicines used to manage back pain.
- [Medications for pain](#) in MSK's Managing Your Pain booklet explains more about the different types of medicines used for pain and tips for using these.

## Physical therapies

Physical or manual therapies like physio, massage and occupational therapy use a hands-on approach to help relieve your pain and stiffness and to improve mobility, movement and joint function.

You can read more about many of these different types of therapies in Section 1 of the back pain self-care plan under [Working with your healthcare team](#) or in the MSK blog [Physical or manual therapies](#).

## Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies are often used by people with back pain to help manage their symptoms.

Read more about complementary therapies and explore other resources in Section 2: [Treatments for back pain](#).

## The importance of exercise

Being physically active is such an important part of managing back pain, we've dedicated a whole section of your self-care plan to it!

Read [Back pain needs exercise](#) to learn all the different ways that being active can help to improve pain and stiffness– as well as boosting your mood and overall wellbeing.

## Soothing heat and cold

Applying heat or cold to sore, stiff joints and painful muscles, tendons or ligaments (called soft tissue) can help relieve your pain.

Some people prefer heat, others prefer cold – and some types of pain prefer either heat or cold.

As a general rule, heat can relieve joint stiffness, muscle spasms and tension. Cold can reduce swelling and may be especially helpful for a hot, tender joint.

Depending on where you are – home, work, out and about – there are many different ways you can use heat and cold. These might include:

### **Heat**

- warm bath, shower or spa
- heat packs
- heat patches
- heat rubs
- hot water bottles
- electric blanket.

### **Cold**

- ice packs
- gel cold pack
- cold gels
- bag of frozen food
- ice cubes.

### **Using heat and cold safely**

Keep some simple safety tips in mind when you're using heat and cold:

- Be aware of the temperature – it should always be comfortable, not too hot or too cold.
- Wrap heat or cold packs in a towel or cloth to help protect your skin from burns and tissue damage.
- Check your skin regularly to make sure that you aren't having any harmful effects from the heat or cold.
- Be very careful using on areas of your skin where you can't feel heat or cold so easily.
- Never use heat or cold over an area of skin where you're numb, or you can't feel light touch or the difference between hot and cold – there's a high risk of burning or damaging your skin.
- These treatments shouldn't be used for long periods of time.
- Heat or cold treatments shouldn't be used on open wounds or damaged skin. Follow the instructions on the pack of patches, rubs, packs and gels.
- When using rubs or gels avoid contact with sensitive areas (like your eyes) and wash your hands really well after applying.
- If you're using a wheat bag, make sure you allow it to cool completely before you reheat it. Don't sleep with your wheat bag or smother it behind you in your chair or bed. This can cause them to overheat and catch fire. Always carefully follow the manufacturer's instructions for use and never overheat them in the microwave.

## **Balancing activity and rest: The art of pacing**

'Pacing' is often a new concept for people with back pain, and it's one that's definitely worth learning more about.

You probably already know about the trap that's so easy to fall into when you live with persistent pain. When you feel good, you do as much as possible and often overdo things. Then, you avoid doing much because it hurts. Both things - overdoing and avoidance - aren't helpful for managing persistent pain and they can actually make your pain worse.

Pacing can be an effective strategy to help you do the things you want to do by finding the right balance between rest and activity (both physical and mental). This can help to reduce your risk of pain flare-ups.

Balancing activity and rest in this way means you'll need to listen to your body and understand what you can do on a good day (when your pain is under control) and on a bad day (when your pain is more intense).

### **How to work out your limits**

Pacing is all about the amount of time you can do things before your pain worsens.

For example, if you know that you can work in the garden for 30 minutes before your pain becomes worse, then that's your current limit. Then you need to take a rest break. A rest break means switching from the active thing you're doing (gardening) to doing something more passive (like reading a book, paying your bills online, or creating a meal plan for the coming week).

Working out your current limits can take some trial and error. Recording your activities and pain levels in a [health tracker](#) or pain journal will help you keep track. It will also help you clearly see the activities, or the time spent on activities, that may be causing you problems.

### **How you'll benefit from pacing**

By understanding your limits, and what you can do at this point in time, you can plan and take control of your day and the things you do. You can plan activities and rest breaks so that by the end of the day, you've done most of the things you wanted or needed to do, and you haven't made your pain worse.

Pacing will also help you gradually increase the amount of time you spend being active and performing certain activities.

## Tips for pacing yourself

- Plan your day.
- Prioritise your activities – what really needs to be done?
- Can you do some things tomorrow?
- Break jobs into smaller tasks. For example, if you know your current limit for cleaning your house is 30 minutes before your back becomes too painful, choose to do 30 minutes and nothing more.
- Switch between physical jobs and less active ones. For example, vacuum the lounge, then sit and sort through your mail or a pile of old magazines. You're still cleaning, but you're not overdoing it.
- You can apply the same principles at work. For example, if you sit at a computer all day and your back becomes stiff and sore after an hour of sitting, get up and move before this happens. Take a stretch break, walk around the block or stroll to the printer – just make sure you move. And set a timer to remind you to take that break!
- Don't overdo things on your good days.
- Ask for help when you need it.

### More to explore

- The Department of Health Western Australia's [painHEALTH](#) website has a section on pacing and goal setting, and includes a helpful pacing work sheet.

## Managing sleep and fatigue

Many people with back pain report problems going to sleep, staying asleep and waking too early – and this is often linked to the pain they're experiencing.

Unfortunately, not getting enough quality sleep lowers your pain threshold. This in turn affects the quality of your sleep. Pain can affect your ability to be active – which affects your quality of sleep and your pain levels. This can make you anxious or stressed – which again will impact on your quality of sleep and the amount of pain you experience.

The diagram below helps to visualise how this happens.



**The pain-sleep cycle**

## How to break the pain-sleep cycle

The good news is there are many things you can do to break this cycle – and improve both your sleep and your pain.

**Talk with your doctor about your sleep and pain.** Is your back pain being managed well enough? Is there something more you can be doing to ease the pain you're experiencing? Managing your condition and your pain levels will help you get a better night's sleep.

**Try not to put too much pressure on yourself to go to sleep.** This can lead to anxiety if you don't fall asleep quickly. Feeling anxious will affect your ability to sleep – and the pain you experience.

**Develop a sleep routine.** Try to go to bed and get up at the same time each day. This will help your body clock regulate production of the hormones needed to go to sleep (melatonin) and to stay awake (serotonin). Limit your time in bed to the amount of sleep you think you need each night. This will help to reduce wakefulness during the night.

**Get out of bed if you're unable to sleep.** Don't stay in bed tossing and turning. Have a warm caffeine-free drink (like chamomile tea or milk), do some gentle stretches or slow breathing exercises and go back to bed when you feel more comfortable. You may need to do this a few times throughout the night if you have a difficult night sleep-or pain-wise.

**Try some relaxation techniques.** These might include mindfulness or visualisation (like counting sheep), deep breathing or a warm bath before bed. Experiment with these techniques to see what works best to help you feel more relaxed, which may help you manage your pain better so that you can get to sleep – and sleep well.

**Be active during the day.** As well its many other benefits, regular exercise, even gentle exercises like stretching, can help you fall asleep and stay asleep longer.

**Eat well.** Your body works best when you eat a wide range of healthy foods. A balanced diet and drinking enough fluid can help provide you with better energy levels and give you a greater sense of wellbeing, which may improve your symptoms and, therefore, your sleep.

**Keep a sleep diary.** This will help you and your doctor work out what may be causing your sleep problems because it tracks the things that may impact on your sleep.

Track these details every day for 2 weeks:

- what time you go to bed
- how long you're in bed before falling asleep (a guesstimate is fine here – don't check the clock!)
- what time you get up
- how often you wake during the night
- the things you eat and drink during the day
- your daily activities
- how you felt that day – noting your pain levels on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being no pain and 10 being severe pain.

You can keep track in a notebook, or there are many apps you can download and use.

**Allow 2-3 hours after your last main meal** before going to bed. This way, your body isn't trying to digest food when it needs to be resting and repairing.

**Avoid alcohol for at least 4 hours before going to bed** as it can affect your ability to fall asleep and the quality of your sleep.

**Avoid caffeine** for a minimum of 6 hours before going to bed. Caffeine can affect some people's sleep for longer than 6 hours, so you may need to make your caffeine cut-off time earlier. Keeping track of caffeine consumption in your sleep diary is a good way of working this out for yourself.

**Consider your bedding.** Your bedding can have a big impact on your comfort and the quality of your sleep. Is your mattress or pillow affecting your sleep? Are they too hard, too soft, or not providing enough support? Are they worn out? Is your linen comfortable, clean and keeping you warm or cool enough (depending on the season)?

**Don't look at the clock (or your phone!).** Often, when you can't fall asleep, or you wake in the middle of the night, you look at the clock or your phone and start thinking about how many hours to go until you need to get up. This creates anxiety and anxiety makes it hard to sleep. Try removing your clock or phone from the bedside, or cover it up at night.

**Write it down.** Thoughts, worries and anxiety can prevent good sleep. Don't take them to bed with you. Keep a 'worry journal' instead. Choose a time during the day – away from your bedtime – to write down your key worries and consider options for dealing with them. When you're in bed at night, firmly tell yourself that bedtime is not worry-time and you'll re-visit your worries tomorrow with your journal.

**Light.** Is your room dark enough to allow you to sleep well? Or do you have a streetlight, light from an alarm clock or phone, or light from other rooms making your bedroom too bright for sleep? If this is a problem, look at solutions – such as new window coverings, a dim switch on your alarm clock, putting your phone onto night mode at bedtime, or closing your door. You might also want to try using an eye mask.

**Noise.** Just as light can interfere with your sleep, so can noise. If you have no control over the noise in your environment (like a barking dog, loud party, or your partner's snoring), ear plugs may be an option. You can pick these up from your chemist. Some people also find that playing soothing, gentle music softly in the background can be helpful for cancelling out other more annoying noises.

**Don't use technology in bed.** It's easy to get caught up and lose track of time reading emails and checking social media on smartphones and tablets. Another problem is that the blue light from these devices suppresses the hormone melatonin that makes us sleepy at night. So be sure to stop using screens at least 1 hour before bed.

**Room temperature.** To fall asleep, your body's core temperature needs to drop a few degrees. This means it's best for your bedroom temperature to be a little cooler (but not cold), rather than warm. A helpful tip from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine is to think of your bedroom as a cave: it should be cool, quiet, and dark.

This is another reason why a warm bath before bed can be especially helpful: as well as relaxing you and easing pain and stiffness, when your body temperature drops after the bath, it prepares you perfectly for sleep.

Use sleeping tablets sparingly and ONLY in times of acute stress to help temporarily reset your sleep pattern. Always talk to your doctor before using any sleep aids that you are thinking about buying over-the-counter.

### **More to explore**

- Arthritis Foundation (USA) has a helpful [joint-by-joint guide](#) to positioning yourself for a good night's sleep.

## Flares and how to manage them

Some people with back pain will go through periods where their pain and other symptoms are worse. This is called a 'flare' or 'flare-up'.

Sometimes back pain flare-ups can appear for no reason, and at other times, a flare may happen because you've been more active than usual, or you've pushed yourself way past your usual activity levels. They also occur when you're stressed, tired, sad, run down and less active.

Flares are temporary, but can be frustrating and painful while they last. So, it's important that you have a plan for how you manage a flare when it happens:

- **Write down** what you were doing before the flare. This can help you identify if there was something you did that triggered the flare. If there was a trigger, hopefully you can avoid repeating it.
- **Pace yourself.** If the flare is the result of overdoing things, think about getting people to help you, or spread the activity over a longer period of time.
- **Prioritise** your tasks and activities. This can also reduce the risk of overdoing things.
- **Manage your stress** – as stress can increase your pain levels. See the ideas for [relaxation techniques](#) in Section 6.
- **Pull out all of your pain management strategies.** Use [heat or cold packs](#) , get a [massage](#), go for a walk, distract yourself ... use all the tools that you know can help you to manage pain.
- **Rest when your body needs it – but not for too long.** Going to bed and not being active during a flare can make your pain and fatigue worse. Get good sleep at night and continue to exercise, but at a lesser intensity than usual. Listen to your body.

## Create a care package

When a flare strikes, imagine how it would feel to open a care package that you've created ahead of time.

When you're feeling quite well, gather the things you know can help to distract you from pain and boost your mood. Put all these items together in a box or basket, so that when you have a flare, you can access it easily.

What you put in your care package is entirely up to you. It may include a favourite magazine that you enjoy every now and again, some really good quality chocolate, your pain playlist, photos from a wonderful holiday (or a brochure for a holiday you're planning), a scented heat pack, or some luxurious hand cream. Whatever you put in there is purely for you – so get creative!

## Tips for creating your own care package

When my pain flares, I want comfort, so in my care package I have warm, fluffy socks, strawberry Freddo frogs, and a beautiful photographic travel book. As soon as I feel better, I replenish the chocolate and swap the socks and book for others. That way it's ready for the next time - Lisa.

### **Create a 'pain playlist'**

There's plenty of evidence to support the use of music for managing pain. Listening to music has been shown to reduce anxiety, fear, depression, pain-related distress, and blood pressure. And when we listen to our preferred style of music, it has an even greater positive effect.

It's not exactly clear how or why music can have such an effect on pain, but it may be that enjoyable music triggers the release of opioids in your brain (which is your body's own morphine).

Or it may be that music distracts your mind from focusing on your pain. Whatever the reason, it's an easy, cost-effective, and enjoyable way to get some relief from your pain.

So why not create a special 'pain playlist', and load up your phone or music player of choice with your favourite tunes? And check out our article on [the power of music](#).

## **Staying connected: Focus on the people and activities that make you happy**

An important tool for managing pain is to stay connected and involved with the people and world around you.

It can be very easy to stop doing the things you enjoy when you're living with pain. You may worry that some activities will make your pain worse, or that you won't be able to participate as well as you have in the past. On days when your pain is intense, or you're feeling tired or frustrated, these negative thoughts and worries have the potential to keep you from the things you love. Pain becomes your focus.

That's why it's important to work at staying connected to those around you. Focus on doing activities that make you happy, such as catching up with friends, participating in sporting and social clubs, working, discovering new hobbies, volunteering, exploring the world, or simply getting out with your family.

These connections can help you manage your pain better. They engage your mind and energy and distract you from the pain so it's no longer your focus. If you find that it's difficult to do some of the things that you used to do, focus more on a few activities that you really enjoy.

When you keep doing things you enjoy, you stay connected and involved. This is what makes our lives rich, colourful and exciting.

### **More to explore**

- Arthritis Foundation's article, [Keeping friendships strong when you have arthritis](#) covers some of the common challenges with friendships when you have arthritis and provides practical suggestions to respond to those challenges.
- Section 6 of your back pain self-care plan is all about looking after your mental and physical wellbeing, where you'll find more info on [intimate relationships](#)

If you're struggling with negative emotions and finding it difficult to stay connected, talk with someone you trust. It might be a close friend or family member, your doctor or a mental health professional like a [psychologist](#) or [psychiatrist](#). Talking about the problem, and getting support and advice can help you to take some positive steps forward.

**If you are thinking about suicide or experiencing a personal crisis, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.**

### **Goal setting**

Having goals is important in life, giving you something to aim for. And that's even truer when you're living with ongoing pain. Having clear goals for an end point that you want to achieve can help you to put the steps into place to get there.

The 'side effect' of setting these goals and taking those steps is often better management of your pain. You can think of goal setting as one way of bringing together many of the ideas in this self-care plan for managing your pain.

Here's an example of how goal setting could work in managing your back pain.

*Let's say your pain is affecting your ability to continue bushwalking with a group of friends you've walked with for years. When you try to do a full walk with them, your back hurts and you become upset.*

*Your goal could be to find a way to get back to this regular bushwalking group without increasing your pain or distress. To do that, you'll need to break down your goal into smaller steps.*

*To put this goal into action, write down your goal and the steps you need to take to achieve it. Put this somewhere that you'll see it often – like the fridge or bathroom mirror. This will help to motivate you. Make sure you include a date when you'll review how you're going. This way you can modify the steps if you're not getting closer to achieving your goal.*

*Using the bushwalking group example, here's what your goal and steps might look:*

### **My bushwalking group goal**

Today's date: 3 September 2023

My goal is: To re-join my weekly bushwalking group by 1 December 2023

To reach my goal, I need to do these things:

1. Make an appointment with my physiotherapist
2. Do the exercises and stretches they recommend to improve my back strength
3. Start walking around the local park to build up my endurance
3. Use pacing to work out how far I can walk at the moment without aggravating my back
4. Slowly increase the distance I can walk
5. Ask my walking group to do a shorter bushwalk with me as a test to see how I go
6. Slowly increase the bushwalking distance

Review date: 17 October 2023

Comments: I'm getting there, but I need to remember to keep pacing myself ... don't try to do too much too soon!

Ask my physio about more stretches I can do to reduce my back pain after longer walks.

You can use this approach for all types of goals you'd like to work towards.

## More to explore

- We have information on [setting goals](#) which takes you through setting SMART goals: goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timed. It uses a weight loss goal as an example, and you can use this same approach for any goal you are working towards.



## 6. Your mental and physical wellbeing

### Things to remember

- Understanding the link between your mind and body and the symptoms you experience can help you make small changes to your thinking and actions that can have a big impact on how you feel.
- Mindfulness meditation and different types of relaxation are helpful ways to relieve stress and improve your mood.
- Living with back pain can affect your intimate relationships and your sex life. Talking openly with your partner and using some of our tips for easing pain and enjoying yourself in the bedroom can help – and you'll have fun trying them out!
- Sometimes, feelings of anxiety and a low mood can be more intense and long-lasting. These may be signs of an anxiety disorder or depression, which are real and treatable illnesses.
- There are many effective treatments for anxiety and depression, including talking therapies, prescription medicine and self-help.

### The link between mind and body

Your mind and body are so closely linked. Living with back pain has probably made this more obvious to you than ever before.

The physical symptoms you experience – like pain and stiffness often have a direct impact on how you feel emotionally. And then, how you're feeling can impact your physical symptoms.

Recognising and acknowledging how your mind and body interact with each other – and that emotional challenges are part of living with an ongoing health condition – can help you find new ways to care for your mental health as part of your overall plan of self-care.

This section will help you to explore the relationship between your mind and body, so you can better understand how one influences the other. We'll introduce tools that have helped other people with back pain to support both their mental and physical wellbeing – often helping both at the same time. You'll also find that many of the ideas in the [Managing your pain](#) section of your self-care plan – like pacing yourself and getting better quality sleep – can help your overall sense of wellbeing.

## **Acceptance**

Accepting that you have back pain and the ongoing symptoms and challenges it creates is a key step in managing it more effectively.

Acknowledging your condition and how it affects you from day to day means you can find practical ways to deal with it.

Acceptance doesn't mean 'thinking positive'. It means understanding that you have back pain, but that back pain doesn't define who you are. By accepting your condition (and its baggage!), you use your energy to take control the best way you can.

Part of this acceptance also means recognising and acknowledging that you're likely to have emotional ups and downs along the way. It's natural for you to feel a range of emotions, including fear, sadness, stress, anger and frustration – and it's important to allow yourself to experience these feelings, talk about them and find ways to manage them.

Speaking with someone – a friend or family member, the National Arthritis and Back Pain+ Help Line on 1800 263 265, your GP, a mental healthcare professional (like a psychiatrist or psychologist ) – can help you work through your feelings and get back on track.

Writing it all down in a journal or pain diary is another option. The important thing is to keep working on it.

It's also important for you to recognise when you're experiencing these feelings more intensely and for longer periods of time – signs that you may have anxiety or depression and need some extra support from a mental healthcare professional. We've covered these treatable health conditions at the [end of this section](#).

## **Mindfulness meditation**

Mindfulness meditation is a way of focusing your mind on the present moment. It trains your mind to be alert and pay attention to the thoughts and the sensations you feel, and accept them without judgement.

Research has shown that regularly practising mindfulness meditation can help to improve mood, relieve stress, improve sleep, improve mental health and reduce pain. So, what exactly is mindfulness meditation and how do you do it?

It's a type of practice that can be formal or informal:

- **Formal mindfulness** meditation is when you put time aside to practice meditation where you focus on one thing for a certain amount of time. You might focus on your breath or the sensations in your body for 10 or more minutes at a time.
- **Informal mindfulness** or everyday mindfulness is where you consciously bring your attention to everyday situations or activities. For example, when you're going for a walk, you notice how your body feels as it moves. How your feet feel against the ground, how your arms feel as they swing by your side, how the air feels against your skin, and the sun feels on the top of your head. You notice all of these sensations and focus on how they feel.

Both types of mindfulness practices can have many benefits for your mental and physical wellbeing. That's partly because mindfulness meditation involves becoming more self-aware and accepting our experiences and feelings without judgement. This can lead to a greater ability to self-regulate your thoughts, emotions and behaviours. In turn, this can help you to manage stressors, chronic pain and health conditions.

Research also shows that regular mindfulness meditation can lead to positive changes in our brain and our genes.

### **More to explore**

- Our [Mindfulness meditation](#) resource explains more and includes great tips on getting started and how to do a simple body scan.
- To learn about the changes and other effects mindfulness has on our body, [watch this short Smiling Mind video](#) featuring Associate Professor Dr Craig Hassed from Monash University.
- The Department of Health Western Australia's painHEALTH website has a page on [Mindfulness and pain](#), which includes a body scan and breathing meditation that you can play online.

### **Relaxation**

Living with persistent back pain can be stressful. And stress can make your pain worse by causing the muscles throughout your body to become tense or to spasm.

By easing your stress and muscle tension, you can help to reduce your pain levels, and create a better sense of overall wellbeing. There are so many things you can try to help you relax.

You might like to try:

- focused and controlled breathing
- gardening
- visualisation
- progressive muscle relaxation
- listening to music
- catching up with friends
- getting a massage
- laughing (try watching a funny movie or silly video clips on YouTube)
- visiting a museum, gallery, exhibition or library (in person or virtually)
- distraction
- reading
- playing with your pet (or someone else's if you don't have one)
- guided imagery
- taking a warm bath or shower
- playing a musical instrument or singing
- doing some art and craft
- getting back to nature – a stroll by the sea or a walk in a park.

See which of these you enjoy and help you – and then find ways to make them part of your everyday life and ongoing self-care plan to live better with back pain.

### **Working is good for your wellbeing**

Working – whether it is paid or voluntary - is good for your mental and physical wellbeing. For many people with back pain, it's an important part of living well by connecting with others, having a sense of purpose, and having a focus outside of your pain.

But back pain can sometimes interfere with your work and may require some extra planning.

There are many things you can do to help you continue working – including using the pain management techniques in Section 5, [modifying your workspace](#), using helpful [aids and equipment](#), and having some flexibility with the hours you work.

## More to explore

- Our [WorkWise](#) resource provides information to help you manage your symptoms, and gives you tips, strategies, and resources to help you continue to work, change jobs, understand your rights and more.
- Our articles Musculoskeletal conditions and work – [part 1](#) and [part 2](#) include many more helpful tips and links to support your working life.

## Sleep and why you need it

Sleep helps you to recharge - both mentally and physically.

While you sleep, your body is busy doing important jobs to help you wake up refreshed and healthy. Your brain is cleaning itself of waste products and consolidating memories. Your muscles, bones, and organs are repairing themselves. Sleep also helps keep your immune system healthy.

That's why it's important to get a good night's sleep – both in quality and quantity.

The amount of sleep you need varies depending on your age. Most adults need about 7–9 hours of sleep each night. However, some people need more sleep and some need less.

The aim is to make sure you have enough quality sleep so that you wake up feeling rested and able to do the things you need to do (so don't feel anxious if you think you're not getting a certain 'magic' number – just focus on getting the right amount of sleep for you).

You're probably very aware of how you feel when you don't get enough sleep: it can make your threshold for pain, stress, and everyday living lower than the days after you've slept well.

Not sleeping well can both contribute to mental health conditions like [anxiety and depression](#), and be a symptom of these conditions.

Many people with back pain have problems going to sleep, staying asleep and waking too early.

[Managing sleep and fatigue in Section 5](#) explains more about the connection between pain, sleep and fatigue and includes a comprehensive guide for getting on top of your sleep that can help you manage pain and your overall sense of wellbeing.

## Personal relationships and intimacy

Living with back pain can affect your intimate relationships and your sex life.

Pain, fatigue, body image issues and side effects from medicines can really interfere with these important parts of your life.

Added to the physical and emotional effects of back pain, the everyday pressures of work, study, family, finances and more can affect your close relationships and your desire to be intimate.

Even though your relationships may change because of back pain, it doesn't need to be in a negative way. Many couples find that they can actually become closer as a result of back pain because it makes it necessary to talk more openly, which can strengthen your relationship.

There are also many things you can do to increase your desire for, and enjoyment of, sex. A lot of this begins with being open and honest with your partner, because trust builds closeness and romance. This gives you the basis to start planning, exploring, getting adventurous and generally having some fun. The links below will give you more details on the 'how' of all this.

### More to explore

- Our article on personal relationships includes many tips for communicating with your partner and [strengthening your relationship](#).
- Our article [Getting your groove back](#) covers lots of clever tips for happy, sexy times when you have a musculoskeletal condition.
- Versus Arthritis (UK) has a helpful page on [Sex, relationships and arthritis](#).
- Staying connected beyond your intimate relationships by enjoying the company of other people and losing yourself in activities you enjoy, is another important tool in your self-care that supports both your mental and physical wellbeing. [Read more](#) in Section 5: Managing your pain.

### Living with flares

Flares – periods where your back pain is worse - are part of the unpredictability of back pain, and can have a big impact on your mental and physical wellbeing.

That's why it's important to plan in advance and have a plan for when flares strike.

[Learn more about flares and how to manage them](#) in Section 5.

## **Anxiety and depression: When you need extra support for your mental health**

### **Anxiety**

Most of us will have times when we feel fearful, stressed and anxious. These are normal responses to stressful situations and are sometimes part of living with back pain.

But these anxious feelings can become a problem when they begin to interfere with your everyday life, making it difficult for you to relax, concentrate or make decisions - or making you feel constantly irritable or panicky. These may be signs of an anxiety disorder, which is a real and treatable illness, and is more than just feeling stressed.

### **Depression**

Most of us feel sad, lonely, unhappy and miserable at times. These are also common, normal feelings when something causes you emotional pain or stress, which can include certain times when you're living with back pain.

However, some people experience these emotions frequently and very intensely for longer periods of time. They lose interest and motivation in their lives and the world around them – and in the activities and people that normally make them feel good. These may be signs of depression, which is a real and treatable illness that is more than feeling low.

### **Getting help for anxiety and depression**

Both anxiety and depression are understandably more common in people who are living with an ongoing and unpredictable health condition like back pain, and so it's reassuring to know that there is help available and that there are effective treatments that can help you to feel much better:

- If you think you may have signs of anxiety or depression, it's important to talk to a healthcare professional as soon as you can.
- Chatting to your GP is often a good place to start. Your GP can then recommend and link you to the type of mental health professional who can best help you. If needed, they can work with you to create a [mental health treatment plan](#), which means that Medicare will pay for part of the cost for you to see certain mental health professionals.
- Read our article [Support for mental and emotional wellbeing](#). It explains more about the different types of mental health professionals, tips for choosing which type of professional might be good for you, and the types of support available.

- Support from other people with back pain through a support group or from other people living with depression or anxiety can also be a great help. Talking with someone who really understands what you're going through and has lived experience and practical info is priceless.

### **Treatments for anxiety and depression**

There are many different types of treatment options available for anxiety and depression. The important thing is to find the right treatment and health professional that works for you.

### ***Psychological or talking therapies***

Psychological therapies (which are sometimes called talking therapies) can help to change your thinking patterns and to cope better with life's challenges.

These therapies are often the most effective types of long-term treatment and prevention for anxiety and depression. As well as helping you to recover, they build your coping skills and reduce the risk of anxiety and depression coming back.

There are many different talking therapies, two types that are often used are:

- **Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)**, which helps you work out how the way you think and act affects the way you feel. The aim is to help you think about, assess, and change your thought patterns and how you react to different circumstances.
- **Interpersonal therapy (IPT)** focuses on you and your relationships with other people to help improve your relationships, increase social support and resolve symptoms.

### ***Medicines***

If your anxiety or depression is severe, your doctor may suggest including treatment with prescription medicine.

If they think prescription medicine may help you, they'll do a full health check and talk to you about how the medicine can be used as part of your treatment plan together with talking therapies and self-help.

Your doctor will talk to you about the medicine's possible side effects and what to expect from treatment.

## **Self-help**

There are many things you can do to help yourself when you have anxiety or depression. It's good to know that many of tools we've covered in this self-care plan – like [staying active](#), [eating well](#), using [mindfulness meditation](#) and [relaxation techniques](#), and enlisting the [support of your family and friends](#) – can help your mood as well as the physical symptoms of back pain.

These tools aren't just for people with diagnosed anxiety or depression either – they can help anyone to build skills to support their mental health and wellbeing.

## **More to explore**

- Read our information on [anxiety and depression](#) to find out about some of the common symptoms of anxiety and depression as well as helpful tips to support your mental wellbeing.
- Arthritis Ireland's [Coping with emotions eBook](#) discusses the range of emotions that you may feel at the time of back pain diagnosis and as time goes on, and then provides practical suggestions for coping.
- Versus Arthritis (UK) has an [Emotional wellbeing](#) section of their website that includes lots of helpful information and tips.



## 7. Looking after yourself

### Things to remember

- Avoiding or reducing certain risky behaviours are essential parts of your self-care too.
- Smoking is linked to developing back pain and can make symptoms worse. Quitting smoking is one of the best things you can ever do for your health.
- Drinking too much alcohol can be risky when you have back pain: interfering with your sleep and mental health and increasing your chance of an injury. Reducing how much you drink can have lots of health benefits.
- There are many aids and gadgets that can make your daily care easier when you have a stiff, painful back.

### Extra steps you can take to protect your health

As well as all the positive steps you can take to help manage back pain and your overall health – like being more active, enjoying healthy eating and managing your pain – there are also some high-risk behaviours that you can avoid as part of your self-care.

Some of these, like quitting smoking and reducing how much alcohol you drink, can take some careful planning. Others, like protecting yourself from the sun and regularly washing your hands, are very simple everyday steps you can take to protect yourself.

This section includes lots of practical strategies and tips to help you include these key parts of self-care into your plan for living well with back pain.

### Quitting smoking

Did you know that smoking is linked to the development of back pain? Smoking also makes it more difficult to manage your pain. It causes fatigue and slower healing, which can make your pain worse.

If you're a smoker, you may be less likely to be as active, and less physical activity can increase your pain too.

So, there are many good reasons to quit smoking if you have back pain. And these are on top of all the other benefits of quitting for your overall health – like a reduced chance of many cancers, and heart and lung diseases.

Within weeks of quitting, you'll breathe better and have more energy, making it easier to exercise and do daily activities.

Over time, your risk of many serious health problems associated with smoking will reduce.

Quitting isn't easy, but the rewards are incredible and there is so much support available. There's no reason to do this alone!

## Tips for quitting

- Get help. Talk to your doctor and call the Quitline on 13 78 48.
- Decide on a strategy. Are you going to use nicotine replacement, medicine, coaching or a combination of these?
- Talk to your family and friends. Let them know what you're doing and ask for their support.
- Write down the reasons you want to quit and put this list in prominent places to encourage and motivate you.
- Think of all the situations where you usually smoke and have a plan for what you'll do instead. What will you do if you're around other smokers? What will you do instead of smoking when you have your first cup of coffee or tea in the morning?
- Be kind to yourself. You may have a slip-up to two. It's not the end of the world, or the end of quitting. Get back on track.
- Use some of the money you save and treat yourself to something special, like a massage or gold class movie tickets.
- The [Quitline's website](#) includes heaps of information to help you plan to quit, quit in your own way and support you along the way.

## Reducing alcohol

Australia is a country that loves to drink! Wine with dinner, beer at the footy, cocktails at the local bar with friends.

As a result, many of us drink more than the [Australian Alcohol Guidelines](#), which provide recommendations for healthy women and men. When you have back pain, the risks involved with drinking alcohol can be even greater.

Here are some ways that alcohol may impact your health when you have back pain:

**Alcohol can interact with your meds** – including commonly used medicines such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatories like ibuprofen, and the combination of alcohol and medicine can cause problems like ulcers, bleeding in the stomach and liver damage.

Be aware of the risks, and always read the labels and consumer medicine information (the leaflet that comes with your prescription medicines) about side effects and interactions.

Talk with your doctor or pharmacist about how alcohol can interact with any of the medicines you are taking.

**Alcohol affects your sleep.** Getting enough quality sleep is vital for our overall health and wellbeing. People with back pain often struggle with sleep – getting to sleep, staying asleep and feeling fatigued when they wake up.

While the idea of a nightcap to help you wind down in the evening may sound like a good idea, alcohol will actually affect the quality of your sleep. Even if you sleep through the night, you're more likely to wake up feeling unrefreshed and foggy.

**Alcohol increases your risk of getting injured.** If you've been drinking, especially if you've become tipsy or drunk, you're more likely to injure yourself. When you become drunk, you lose your balance and coordination, increasing the risk of falling. A tipsy fall and back pain are not a good combination.

If you do drink too much, you're also more likely to engage in risky behaviours, such as driving, which puts yourself and others at risk.

**Alcohol can affect your mental health.** Many people turn to alcohol to relax after a stressful day or if they're feeling a bit down. While it may provide a very temporary mood boost; it doesn't last. In the long run, drinking can actually make it harder to deal with stress – and can add to feelings of anxiety and depression.

### **The many benefits of taking a break from booze**

On the upside of all this, if you reduce the amount of alcohol you drink, you're likely to experience lots of benefits – including losing weight, saving money, having more meaningful times with family and friends, sleeping better, having a clearer head and performing better at work.

### **More to explore**

- If you're thinking about slowing down on your drinking, read our article [Should I take a break from booze?](#) It includes lots of tips to help you reduce the hooch (almost painlessly!).
- Sleep Foundation's article [Alcohol and sleep](#) explains how alcohol affects sleep and answers FAQs on the topic.

## Protecting yourself from the sun

Some medicines you may take to treat back pain, as well as other more general medicines, can cause your skin to become sensitive to sunlight, where you can become sunburnt and develop skin rashes, even after a very small amount of exposure to the sun. This is called photosensitivity.

Medicines that can make you more sun sensitive include:

- non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS) - like diclofenac and ibuprofen
- antidepressants
- oral contraceptives
- tetracycline-based antibiotics

Your doctor or pharmacist can tell you more about medicines that are likely to make you sun sensitive.

If you're taking any of these medicines, it's especially important to protect yourself from the sun, by seeking out shade, covering up with clothing, wearing a hat, and using a minimum SPF30+ sunscreen on any areas of skin that you can't cover up.

## More to explore

- Our article [Enjoying the sun safely](#) includes more practical tips to protect yourself in the sun.
- We all need to balance the need for sun protection with our need for vitamin D. This info will help you to find that balance:
  - Our article on [Calcium and vitamin D](#)
  - Osteoporosis Australia's [Vitamin D & Bone Health](#) page, which includes a map to work out how much daily or weekly sun you need for your vitamin D in each area of Australia.

## **Aids and equipment to make life easier**

When you have back pain, some simple daily tasks at home and at work can become difficult and painful.

Fortunately, there are plenty of aids, gadgets and other equipment to help make your life easier.

Aids and equipment can help you with everything from cooking, cleaning, bathing, writing, mobility, technology and driving.

You can buy some of this equipment from pharmacies, medical suppliers, and hardware stores. Some items can be made by a home handyperson.

If your equipment needs to be installed, you'll need to make sure it's done properly – as equipment like grab rails and bath seats can be dangerous if they're not properly installed. A competent home handyperson and some tradies can do the job – or chat to your local council to see if they can arrange installation.

## **How an occupational therapist (OT) can help**

The range of aids, equipment and other gadgets available is enormous, so you might want to chat with an occupational therapist (OT) to get specific information and advice about the right aids for your needs.

An OT can help you in many other ways when you have back pain, so it's worth enlisting their help as part of your [healthcare team](#).

## **Common aids and equipment**

Some of the aids and equipment that can be useful for people with back pain include:

- long-handled shoehorns to help put on shoes
- grabbers and reaching aids to help you pick up objects from the ground
- support cushions
- walking aids – cane, walking stick or frame
- swivel seat cushion to help you get in and out of the car.

This is a very small list to help you understand some of the options available to help you. There are many more aids and equipment available to suit specific tasks and needs.

## More to explore

- Find an occupational therapist [here](#).
- [Freedom Solutions](#) is a not-for-profit organisation that makes and modifies equipment needs for people with a disability.
- You may be eligible for assistance with the cost of aids through the [Victorian State-wide Equipment Program \(SWEP\)](#). This can sometimes help with the cost of aids such as wheelchairs or alterations to bathrooms. Have a chat to your GP or OT about this program and your eligibility. It's important to note that there may be a long wait for items available through this scheme.



