

Patient Self Help Advice

Low Back Pain and Middle Back Pain

If you have suddenly developed severe pain in your low or middle back, there are things that you can do to help your recovery.

Put simply you can:

- Rest.
- Support your spine.
- Use painkillers.
- Be particularly careful of your posture and everyday activities.
- Do some gentle exercises, see pages 5 and 6.
- Use heat or ice packs.

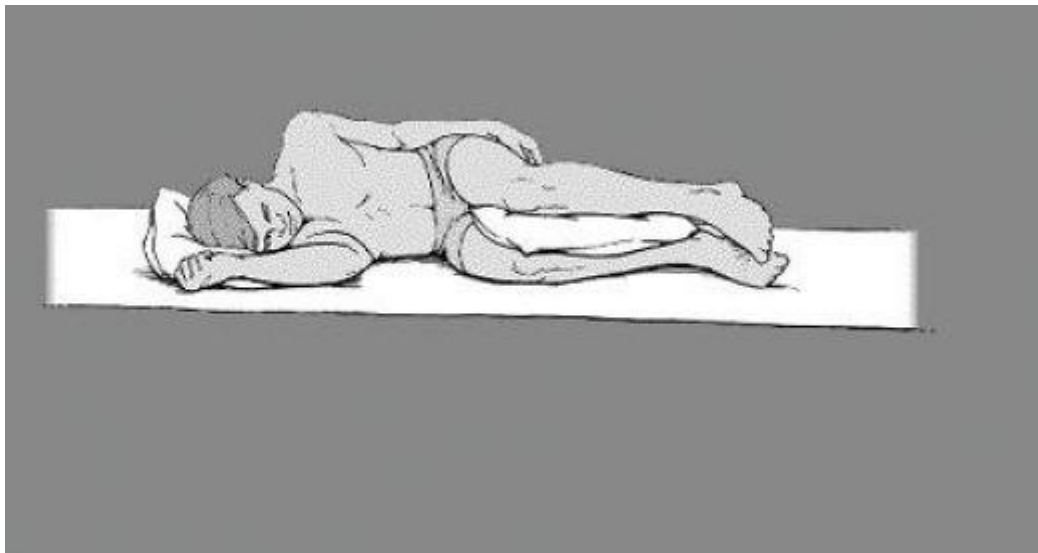
The first 3-4 days are crucial to a speedy recovery.

You will almost certainly need to take time off work, and that includes housework, as you need to rest. **Rest allows your powerful and complex healing process to work.**

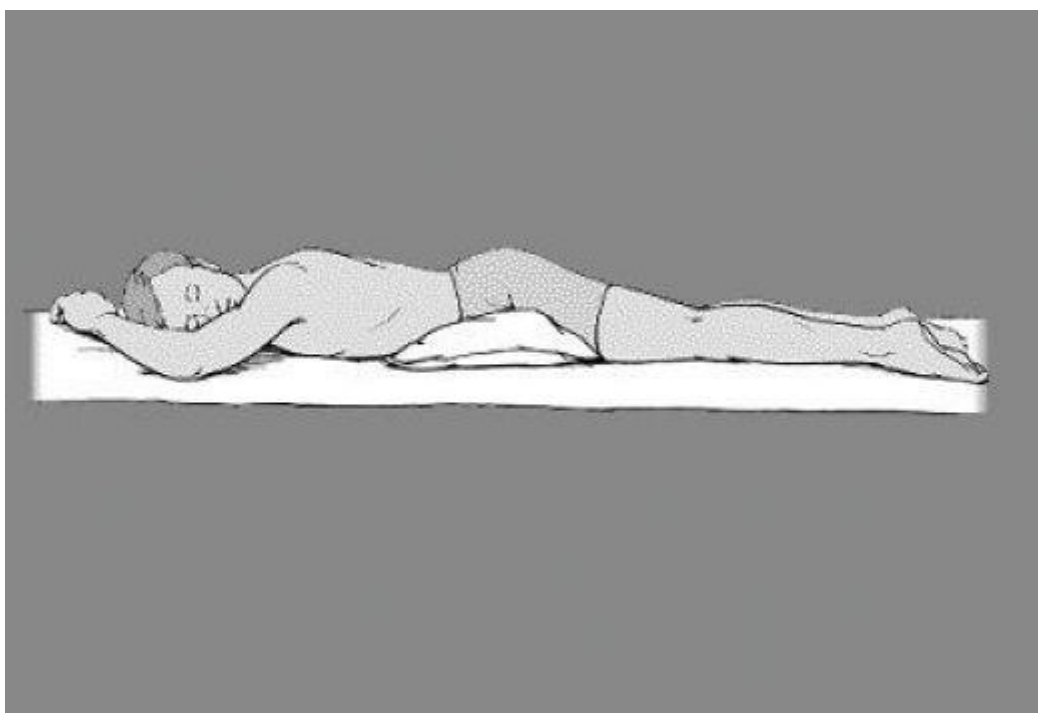
You need to find the position in which you are most comfortable, and which fully supports your spine. It might be lying on your side, or on your front. The best position, if you can manage it comfortably is lying on your back.

These positions can be adapted with the use of pillows to give your spine the full support it needs.

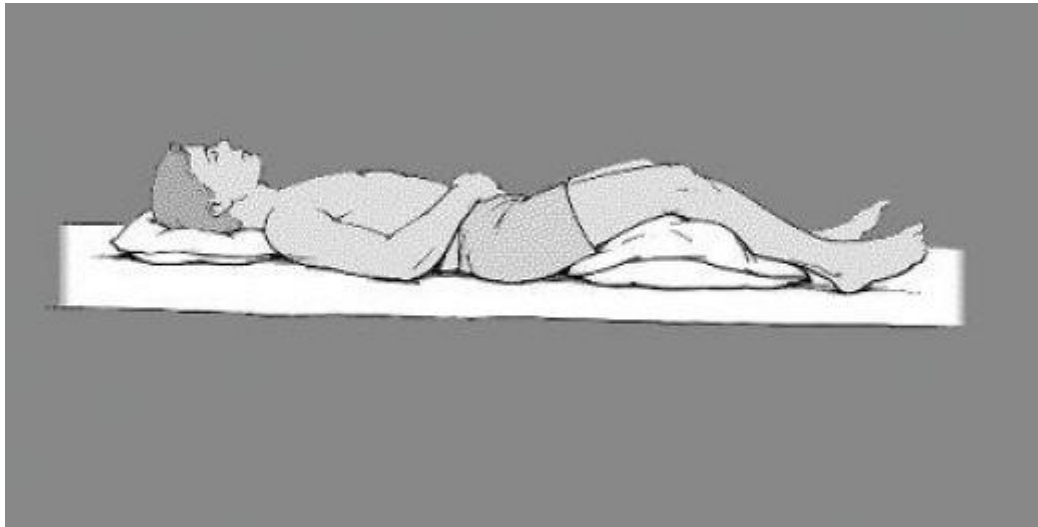
If you lie on your side, try placing a pillow in between your knees, and/or under your waist:



If you lie on your front:



If you lie on your back:



These pillow suggestions are intended to help you sleep more easily and comfortably. Relaxed, supported sleep is an important part of the healing process. Poor, fitful sleep leaves you tired and hinders the healing process. Once awake **Don't** lie in bed. It is far better, no matter how uncomfortable or awkward, to get up and move around.

The double or single leg bends (exercise 3) done a few times gently before you rise can help ease the muscles into activity. Alternatively try going into a deep squat, holding onto a chair or a stable piece of furniture.

Once up and mobile **vary your posture and activity.**

- **Don't** lie on the settee or sit up against the wall with your legs straight out in front of you. You won't be able to properly support your spine.
- **Try not** to sit at all. If you do sit down, sit on an upright firm chair and use a cushion or roll in the small of your back.
- **Don't** sit in low soft chairs.
- **Don't** sit for more than 20 minutes.
- **Supported** kneeling can be better than sitting but again you might only manage 20 minutes to begin with.

Supported kneeling is kneeling on a cushion or pillow, with another cushion between your bottom and heels.

Sitting down causes a lot of back problems. When you sit down your muscles relax a little, but unfortunately there is more pressure on the spinal joints. This is more exaggerated if you sit in a poor slumped position, or with poor spinal support.

Generally you need to vary your position regularly through the day from standing to lying or kneeling. Sit only for very short spells. Regular walks can help, even if only a few times round the room.

Use painkillers to reduce the severity of the pain. You can get Paracetamol, Aspirin, Solpadine, Paracodol and Ibuprofen directly from your chemist. If you have seen your Doctor take their advice on painkillers. You ought to be able to reduce the use of pain killers by one week after the onset of your back pain.

If you have a strong feeling that you have injured the tissue of your spine. That is, you twisted, jarred, fell, pulled or lifted and felt something give, then use an ice pack at the sight of the injury for the first 36-48 hours-**Don't** use heat during this time. The best ice pack is crushed ice in a damp cloth packed at the sight of the injury and left in place for 15 minutes. There are other cold pack products on the market that you can use "dry". You can repeat ice packs as often as every 4 hours. After two or three days you would be better off using heat. This could be a heat lamp, hot water bottle, or hot shower jet onto your back. Baths can be relaxing but your posture in the bath will be less than ideal. If you relaxed after a bath it would be a good idea to do some gentle exercise immediately afterwards, or lie on your back in one of the suggested positions.

Kneeling with your back against a warm radiator can help but **DO NOT** sit against a radiator with your legs straight out in front of you. You can sit with a hot water bottle in the small of your back, but don't remain seated for more than 20 minutes.

After a few days you should be feeling a little better. At this stage you need to be doing gentle every activities and gentle spinal mobility exercises.

Pay particular care to posture. Try to avoid twisting and excessive bending. Avoid prolonged stooping activities and the heavier housework like hoovering. Generally just do short periods of work broken up with periods of rest (lying down), exercises, walking, standing tall, kneeling or supported sitting. Pay attention to the signs from your back. At the first sign of pain or discomfort stop whatever you are doing and rest or do gentle exercises.

You can carry on using heat on your back if it feels tense or stiff. Massage can be helpful or stroking, kneading or patting. If your skin is sensitive to touch then you are better to massage yourself as you know what touch is bearable.

Only think about going back to work when you are fit to do so. If you have an active job you need to be doing all the exercises comfortably and testing your fitness by doing a range of household/garden activities that are equivalent to your work.

EXERCISES

Low Back

Pelvic tilt
Double knee rolling
Double/single leg bends
Back extension to elbow prop
Hamstring
Hip flexors

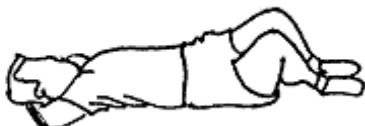
Middle Back

Pelvic tilt
Double knee rolling
Bell
Cat stretch
Shoulder girdle retraction (Try physio tools and text if possible)
Full arm elevation double or single (Try physio tools and text if possible)
Auto traction door traction
 Pelvic tilt
 Pelvic tilt/arm elevation
Slump in postural correct (in sitting)
Single neck retraction (spine lying)

Low Back



Pelvic tilt: Lie on your back with a pillow supporting your neck and head. Have your legs bent and put slightly apart. Using your seat muscles curl your your pelvis to feel the tail bone lift no more than an inch from the floor. Hold for a second, slowly release then rest for a count of 2-3 before repeating.



Double knee rolling: The start position is much like exercise 1 except that your knees and ankles should be together and your arms out to the side (crucifix position). Gently roll your knees first to one side and then to the other going as far as you comfortably can. If going to one side e.g. to the right is painful and makes you feel worse then just to the other side. Every now and then try the painful side to see if it is better. If and when it is go side to side.



Single leg bends: The start position again is like exercise 1, although you can have one leg down straight. Try both positions. Take your knee in your hands and bring it towards your chest. Hold for a count of 3 and release. Repeat on the other leg. You can do this exercise with both knees at the same time.



Back extension: Lie face down on the floor, hands level with your ears. Press yourself up, keeping your pelvis on the floor, until your forearms are flat. Try to relax (sag) the small of your back **DON'T** arch your neck back, keep it level with the spine or slightly tucked in.

Hamstrings: There are many hamstring stretch exercises. If you are familiar with one, try that one. As long as you are comfortably supported and control the stretch you should be safe. **DO NOT** stand and bend to touch your toes it is potentially harmful.

Here are two hamstring exercises



Lie on your back, head and neck supported. Have one leg bent, or straight. Take hold of the back of the other leg in your hands, and hold the thigh firm. Lift your lower leg as far as you can towards the straight position. Hold for a count of 5. Repeat on the other leg.

Lie on your back, one leg straight the other leg bent. Sit on your hands. Lift the straight leg up as high as you comfortably can, keeping the leg straight. **DO NOT** lift too fast, make sure you can control the speed and range of movement. Repeat on the other leg.

Hip flexors: This stretch is very similar to exercise 3 the single leg bend. Bring one knee up towards your chest and hold it. Press the straight leg very firmly backwards to feel the tension at the front of the hip. Hold for a count of 5 and release. Relax and repeat on the other leg.