

Mechanical Back Pain

Mechanical back pain is what we call it when you are struggling with back pain mainly on movement. This can be because of discomfort of your spinal structures. The spine is made up from a number of different structures, these include:

- Ligaments (connective tissue)
- Joints
- Muscles
- Intervertebral discs

Mechanical pain can affect any part of your back from your neck to your lower back. It can be triggered by everyday activities at home or at work, and can come on suddenly or develop over time. Sometimes this will feel random.

How is Mechanical Back Pain Diagnosed

Mechanical back pain is diagnosed from the symptoms that you describe and how you present in your physical examination. Most people do not need further investigations as the diagnosis is made on clinical presentation and the further investigations will not change how you present.

What's Wrong with Me?

Few people with pain affecting their neck or back can identify a specific cause for their symptoms. However it can come on with repetitive bending or when performing very normal everyday tasks, such as tying your shoelaces or picking up the kids. In most people the pain comes on without a specific cause.

Others will report their symptoms have developed gradually over time without a particular reason. Whether you are able to recognise the cause or not, lifestyle factors, stress and the way you use your body are all likely to contribute to your pain.

What are the Main Symptoms of Mechanical Back Pain?

The most common symptoms include:

- Pain
- Stiffness
- Difficulty moving

Symptoms will differ between people and it is common that certain activities will aggravate your pain, e.g. bending forwards or backwards. Sometimes people with mechanical back pain may find that they experience pain that extends into a limb. For example, people with neck pain may experience pain in the outer arm, while people with back pain may experience pain in the back of the thigh. Pain such as this is not necessarily

a sign of nerve irritation. Joints and connective tissue can cause pain to refer into your limbs (this is called Referred Pain, see our leaflet for more information).

How Long Will it Take to Get Better?

Mechanical pain affects around 80% of the population at some point in their life. If you have had back pain in the past, this does not mean you are any more likely to get it again. Usually if left untreated most people will find their pain naturally resolves over a period of 6 to 12 weeks.

If your pain goes on for longer than this then is it possible that there are certain lifestyle, stress and activity factors that are delaying your improvement. [See our Health & Wellbeing page for help with these.](#)

People with mechanical back pain generally respond quickly to conservative management. However, it can take several months of exercise, pacing and pain medication before you see improvements in your symptoms and function. It is therefore important you perform exercises regularly for this period to see your symptoms improve.

What Can I Do to Help Myself Get Better?

Although mechanical pain can affect your quality of life, it is not serious. Your spine is still strong and you should remain as active as possible. Our bodies love to move. Most people with mechanical back pain can successfully manage their symptoms with rehabilitation and exercise. While it is common that people with spinal pain will look for someone to get rid of their pain, it is more effective to find a way to be in control and manage your symptoms.