

Back Pain

A practical guide to activity and seeking help

For adults with low back pain. Many new episodes improve over the following weeks. Keep everyday activities manageable and build back gradually. Your symptoms and health history determine the advice that is right for you.

Keep moving with adjustments

Try shorter walks or smaller amounts of daily activity. Brief rest may help, but avoid extended bed rest. Reduce a task's duration or load if needed, then progress as you are able. Seek advice for substantial ongoing worsening or new leg symptoms.

Build a plan that suits you

For persistent pain, exercise can help, although benefits vary. Choose activities you can practise consistently, such as walking, strengthening or water-based exercise. Hands-on treatment may support comfort alongside active care. Include sleep, stress and your everyday goals in the discussion.

A scan is not always needed

X-rays and MRI are not routinely needed for uncomplicated low back pain. Assessment helps decide whether imaging is appropriate. Findings on a scan need to be considered alongside your symptoms.

When to seek help

Arrange an assessment if pain is worsening, not improving, repeatedly returning or affecting work, sleep or daily activities. Leg pain, numbness or weakness also need review.

Seek emergency medical care for new difficulty passing urine or loss of bladder or bowel control, numbness around the genitals, buttocks or inner thighs, or severe or rapidly worsening leg weakness.

Seek prompt medical review for pain with fever or feeling significantly unwell, after significant injury, or with unexplained weight loss or a history of cancer. Mention osteoporosis or prolonged steroid use, especially after a fall.

After recovery

A tailored walking programme with education and physiotherapist support reduced recurrence in the Australian WalkBack trial. Start gradually; the study does not establish a fixed walking prescription for everyone during a flare-up.

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General information only; this guide does not replace individual assessment or medical advice.

Sources: Australian Low Back Pain Clinical Care Standard (2022); WHO guideline (2023);
Cochrane overview (2025); WalkBack trial (2024).