

SUDDEN BACK PAIN – WHAT CAN I DO?



Source: Françoise Fine

DEAR PATIENT,

You recently developed back pain and you would like to know where the symptoms come from, how to treat them and what you yourself can do to help.

There is one important thing you should know: you are not alone. In Germany back pain is one of the most frequent types of pain. Around three out of four Germans state that they have experienced discomfort of this kind at least once in their lives.

▶ THE HEALTHY BACK

The human spine consists of 33 bony vertebrae and the rubber-like discs between them. They act as a kind of shock absorber. Ligaments made of strong connective tissue and back muscles stabilise and support the spine.

In the course of everyday life your back has to withstand enormous strain. The spine is not just the body's stable axis bearing the weight of the head, arms and trunk; it is also elastic to facilitate movements like bending, stretching or turning.

Ongoing strain like sitting bent over or poor posture, a lack of physical exercise or obesity can, however, disrupt your balance. This can lead to pain.

▶ THE DISORDER

Back pain is pain in the back area below the arch of the ribs and above the buttocks. It does not include the neck or shoulder area.

This information is intended for people with acute, non-specific back pain. Acute means that you have had the symptoms for less than six weeks. Non-specific means that the pain cannot be attributed to any clear physical changes or disorders like, for instance, inflammations, tumours or disc damage.

At least 85 out of 100 people with back pain have non-specific symptoms. The pain is often stressful, sometimes even worrying and affects the sufferers' daily lives. In most cases it is, however, harmless and disappears within a short space of time.

▶ THE EXAMINATION

The vital element here is the consultation between you and your doctor. This will supply him with the basic details about your medical history. The physical examination is equally important. The two together are often enough to rule out any serious underlying reason for your complaint.

The physical examination is based on the results of the consultation. Your doctor will look, for instance, at your posture and shape of your spine and examine your back muscles for painful spots. Then he'll check your mobility, muscle power, sensation and your leg reflexes.

If the patient-doctor consultation and the physical examination do not come up with any pointers for a dangerous course of the disorder or other serious pathological changes, no further examinations will be undertaken for the time being.

▶ THE TREATMENT

As a rule, the symptoms of acute, non-specific back pain improve after a short time on their own. Most people who go to the doctor for the first time for back pain, therefore, simply need a pain killer and some medical advice. The short-term use of painkillers is intended to help you to help to keep up your daily activities as far as possible. Bed rest or taking things easy are detrimental to your recovery.

▶ Acute Back Pain

▶ THE TREATMENT

In addition, there are a number of non-medicinal procedures. Some of them can support your treatment; others should not be used as their benefits have not been proven so far scientifically.

More detailed information is provided in the **Patient Guideline** (see box).

▶ WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Get moving!**
Try to maintain your physical activity as well as you can or return to it gradually. This will promote a speedy recovery from your disorder and prevent chronic illness.
- **Keep yourself and your back fit.** Choose a type of exercise that you enjoy and is kind to your back, for instance swimming, walking or cycling. Build up your back muscles and improve your strength, endurance and flexibility. As a result back pain may occur less frequently or disappear altogether.
- **Do not place a strain on your back** by remaining in the same position like sitting or standing for a long time. Change your position frequently. If you have to spend a lot of time sitting down at work, talk to your employer about suitable seating. Nonetheless, the best strategy is to regularly stand up, stretch and take a few steps.
- **If you are overweight, losing weight will reduce the strain on your spine.**
- **Find out more about your disorder and possible forms of treatment.** The more you know, the better you can influence your own healing process and improve your quality of life.
- **Acute back pain is only rarely caused by something serious.** Nonetheless, keep an eye out for additional signs. If you experience symptoms of muscle paralysis, numbness or difficulty in passing water or emptying your bowels, consult your doctor immediately. These may be indications of a specific underlying disease that requires immediate attention.

▶ MORE INFORMATION

This Patient Information is based on the latest scientific findings and sums up the most important points from the Patient Guideline “Back Pain”.

Other useful links

Patient Guideline “Back Pain“

www.patienten-information.de/patientenleitlinien

Self-help organisations and co-operation partners involved in the Patient Guideline

www.patienten-information.de/patientenbeteiligung/selbsthilfe, www.azq.de/pf

Self-help contact

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

Patient Guidelines

Patient Guidelines translate the treatment recommendations in medical guidelines into everyday language that can be understood by ordinary people. They provide important background information on the causes, examination methods and treatment of a disease. The BÄK (German Medical Association), the KBV (National Associations of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians) and the AWMF (Association of Scientific Medical Societies) working group are the co-ordinators of the programme for the development of medical guidelines (“National Medical Guidelines”) and the respective patient versions.

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