

Low Back Pain

Low back pain is one of the most common complaints treated by physiotherapists. It has been estimated that around 90% of the population will experience low back pain at some point in their lives. Low back pain can be classified as either acute (which is pain that has lasted less than 6 weeks) or chronic, and these can be further divided into 3 main diagnoses:

- Non-specific low back pain (NSLBP)
- Nerve root irritation/compromise
- Serious spinal pathology (such as fractures or inflammatory diseases of the spine)

Your physiotherapist will ask you a series of questions and perform a physical examination to differentiate the cause of your symptoms.

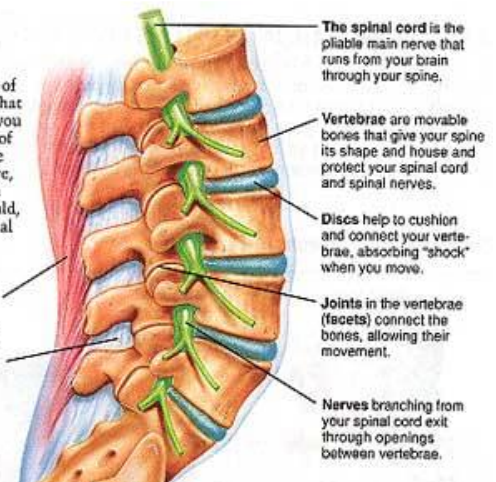
NSLBP is by far the most common cause of low back pain, accounting for around 90% of back pain patients. Occasionally, NSLBP is accompanied by pain in one or both legs (called referred pain), which is when a problem in one area is perceived by the brain as a problem in another area with the same nerve supply. Non-specific low back pain gets its name because the extremely complex anatomy of the back (see image below) makes it very hard to determine the exact structure that is causing the pain. Scientific studies have found that appropriate treatment aimed at restoring movement and avoiding bed rest allow for a rapid resolution of symptoms in over 95% of patients with NSLBP.

It is very important to keep moving within your pain tolerance with NSLBP. Pain caused by movement does not mean that further damage is being done – a bit like poking a bruise, it causes discomfort but does not make the problem worse. Inactivity has been linked with an increased chance of the pain becoming chronic.

Anatomy of a Curve

Your spine is made up of bones and soft tissue that work together to help you move. If one or more of the parts of your spine aren't doing their share, your spine may not be able to work as it should, which can lead to spinal degeneration.

Muscles help to hold up your spine and permit movement by contracting. Ligaments hold your vertebrae together.



Nerve root compression occurs when one of the nerves that leave the back is irritated, this occurs in about 5% of cases. The underlying causes of this can be varied, but it is characterised by radiating pain, pins and needles or numbness, usually into one limb and often extending past the knee. Weakness in the muscles supplied by the affected nerve may be present. The lower back may even be pain free. Physio treatments aim to relieve the irritation on the nerve root, although if this is unsuccessful, further investigation is sometimes required.

Serious spinal pathologies account for around 1% of back pain patients. If your physio suspects this may be your problem, you will usually be referred to a doctor for further investigations and treatment.