

SUDDEN BACK PAIN – WHAT CAN I DO?



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DEAR PATIENT,

You recently developed back pain and you would like to know what caused it, how to treat it and what you can do to relieve the discomfort.

In Germany back pain is one of the most frequent types of pain. Around four out of five Germans state that they have experienced discomfort of this kind at least once in their lives.

This information is intended for people who have been suffering from back pain for less than six weeks.

At a glance: sudden back pain

- Back pain is very common. If it is not caused by anything dangerous necessitating special treatment. The term used to describe this condition is *non-specific back pain*.
- In most people affected by it, sudden back pain normally disappears on its own after a short period of time.
- Your doctor will ask you a few questions and then do a physical examination. This is usually enough to rule out any worrying causes. Initially, no further examinations are normally required, no x-ray or MRI either.
- What is important is: staying active. This is the best way of relieving back pain. Other methods, for instance medication, merely constitute additional forms of support. Healthcare professionals specifically advise against back injections.

▶ THE HEALTHY BACK

The human spine consists of vertebrae and intervertebral discs. It forms the stable axis of the body. Back muscles and strong connective tissue stabilise the spine.

The spine bears the weight of the head, arms and torso. At the same time, it facilitates movements like bending, stretching or turning.

▶ WHAT IS BACK PAIN?

Back pain is pain in the region of the back below the ribcage and above the buttocks. In most cases, there is no clear reason for the symptoms. The term used by healthcare professionals to describe this condition is *non-specific back pain*. It is usually harmless and gets better after a short period of time. There are no signs of dangerous causes such as inflammation or fractured vertebrae. However, this sudden back pain may cause discomfort and limit you in your daily life.

▶ WHERE DOES THIS PAIN COME FROM?

Back pain occurs when the nerves close to the spine are irritated. There are several possible reasons for this, for instance:

- tense muscles
- poor posture
- obesity
- lack of exercise
- too much time spent sitting down

Daily, emotional or professional pressures may also trigger back pain and influence how it develops.

▶ THE EXAMINATION

When you consult your doctor about sudden back pain, he will first attempt to identify whether there is a clear cause. To this end, your doctor will ask you a few questions and then undertake a physical examination.

Normally, this suffices to rule out anything serious. Only in exceptional cases or when the pain lasts longer than 4 to 6 weeks, may other tests such as imaging procedures (x-ray, MRI, CT) or laboratory tests be carried out.

▶ TREATMENT

If you suddenly develop back pain, it is important to keep moving. Highly reliable studies have confirmed this. You do not have to engage in any intensive sports activities. The more you stick to or keep building on your normal daily activities, the better.

Pain killers may provide temporary relief. Pain killers from the group of *non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)* are the most frequently recommended. They include active agents such as diclofenac, ibuprofen and naproxen. But they may have side effects. Healthcare professionals do, however, advise against taking the common painkiller paracetamol. According to the latest studies, this medication did not reduce back pain. Bed rest can harm you. Many reliable studies have shown that bed rest does not improve but rather exacerbates this condition and delays recovery. Moreover, it can have a detrimental effect on muscles and increases the risk of blood clot formation.

If physical exercise and medication do not offer sufficient relief, non-medicinal procedures are another additional option. For instance, heat therapy, acupuncture or movement therapy may be offered in combination with back training sessions.

Other procedures should be avoided as their benefits have not been sufficiently proven scientifically up to now. They include massage, medical taping, insoles, occupational therapy and treatments involving electricity, cold, lasers, magnetic fields or ultrasound.

The Patient Guideline "Back Pain" contains extensive information about treatment: see box.

▶ MORE INFORMATION

This Patient Information is based on the **Patient Guideline "Back Pain"**:

www.patienten-information.de/patientenleitlinien/kreuzschmerz

The Patient Guideline was prepared as part of the Programme for National Care Guidelines. It is funded by the German Medical Association (BÄK), the Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians (KBV) and the Working Group of Scientific Medical Societies (AWMF).

Further brief information "Actively handling persistent back pain": www.patienten-information.de

Methodology and sources: www.patienten-information.de/kurzinformationen/akuter-kreuzschmerz#methodik

Contact to self-help groups

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

▶ WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Try to maintain your normal level of physical activity as well as you can or return to it gradually. This will promote a speedy recovery from your disorder and will prevent chronic illness.
- Physical exercise alleviates back pain. Choose a type of exercise that you enjoy and is kind to your back, for instance swimming, walking or cycling. This will build up your back muscles and improve your strength, endurance and flexibility.
- Minor changes can relieve the strain on your back. Change your position frequently when standing or sitting for longer periods of time. If you have to spend a lot of time sitting down at work, talk to your employer about suitable seating. The best strategy is however to regularly stand up, stretch and take a few steps.
- If you are overweight, shedding a few kilos will reduce the pressure on your spine.
- Find out more about your condition and possible forms of treatment. The more you know, the better you will be able to deal with it.
- Back pain is only rarely caused by something serious. Nonetheless, be on the lookout for additional signs. If, in addition to pain, you experience symptoms of muscle paralysis, numbness or difficulty in passing water or emptying your bowels, consult a doctor immediately. These may be symptoms of a condition that requires immediate attention.

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