

Physiotherapy and low back pain

Get the right relief

What is low back pain and chronic low back pain?

Low back, or lumbar pain, is pain experienced between the bottom of the rib cage and the top of the pelvis.

Almost everyone has low back pain at some stage during their life. Unfortunately, many people experience this pain, either continuously or episodically, for long periods.

When this pain persists for longer than three months, it is called chronic low back pain.

Causes of low back pain

Many instances of chronic low back pain do not have an easily identifiable anatomical, or structural, cause (see [chronic pain fact sheet](#)). This fact is often frustrating because of our shared, historical understanding, that if we experience pain, there must be something wrong with the structure of the body.

Over recent decades, we have come to understand that low back pain, like other forms of pain, has many possible contributors. Physical contributors to low back pain, such as a poorly working muscular system and stiffness in the spine, can all be competently assessed by a physiotherapist.

Our mood, understanding of the problem, the messages we get from our society and healthcare practitioners, our general health and physical fitness can all influence the way the nervous system processes pain. This does not mean that pain is 'in your head'. If you experience pain, it is real! Rather, it suggests that all contributing factors need to be evaluated to assess why your pain continues.

Throughout our lives, our nervous system changes and adapts to help us learn from and deal with different experiences – this is called neuroplasticity. Sometimes, however, this normal process of adapting leads to a 'sensitised state', where small triggers to the body create a large pain response. Recent evidence¹ shows that this is what occurs in many cases of persistent or chronic pain. It reminds us that we need to look further than what 'damage' might exist to the body's structures and tissues to determine why you are experiencing pain.

The immune system is an important controller of the pain system, meaning that health and lifestyle situations are strong influencers of pain. Pain frequently reduces our quality of sleep, which can make life tough, and poor sleep can in turn increase our pain.



Chronic low back pain is the leading cause of disability in Australia and throughout the world³.



At any one point in time, between seven and 10 per cent of all Australians will have low back pain⁴.



Chronic low back pain leads to significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety, and is associated with significant challenges with the use of opioid medications⁵.



How can physiotherapy help?

Chronic back pain stops people from moving. Physiotherapists can help you participate in life's activities, in a safe way, and empower you to be the driver of your own progress.

Your physiotherapist will help you navigate the health system and find the best health services for your situation.

Physiotherapists are highly educated, trained and competent in assessment, diagnosis, education and advising what the best treatment options are for you. They can also help you understand how all the challenges associated with chronic pain fit together.

Every patient is different in both presentation and goals. Your physiotherapist will utilise the evidence-base, their clinical expertise and your specific presentation and concerns to determine the best management. Your physiotherapist will refer you on, or seek further investigations as necessary.

Treatment

Physiotherapy treatment encompasses all evidence-based treatment options which are non-pharmaceutical and non-surgical. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach for low back pain and your physiotherapist will work with you to explore all the possible interventions. They will also clear up any misinformation or confusing advice you may have received.

Frequently in chronic low back pain, hands-on administrations are not as successful as they may be in treating acute pain. More commonly, an appropriate active regime can help you to reduce pain, improve flexibility and strength and regain your confidence to move.

Research shows that exercise, physical activity, accurate education and strong therapeutic relationships with physiotherapists, all assist people to significantly improve their chronic low back pain.

Physiotherapy management is always 'patient-centred', making sure that you are informed and respected in the decision-making process. Research shows² that education and treatment which empowers you is a huge and effective part of chronic pain management. Your physiotherapist can help with all these things, and physiotherapists aim to be your expert partner in fitness and in physical health.

What next?

GO TO

[choose.physio/find-a-physio](https://www.choose.physio/find-a-physio)

To find your physiotherapist.

VISIT

www.choose.physio/pain

for further information.

www.choose.physio/pain

REFERENCES

- 1 Eller-Smith, N. C., 2018. *Potential Mechanisms Underlying Centralized Pain and Emerging Therapeutic Interventions*. Available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fncel.2018.00035/full>
- 2 National Clinical Guideline Centre (UK). 2020. *Osteoarthritis: care and management*. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK568417/>
- 3 *Global Burden of Disease*. 2019. <https://www.healthdata.org/gbd/2019>
- 4,5 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. *Back problems*. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/chronic-musculoskeletal-conditions/back-problems>