

# Mechanical Spinal Pain

This leaflet gives you information mechanical spinal pain and what you can do to help manage the symptoms you are experiencing.

## What is Mechanical Pain?

Mechanical pain is the term given to pain and discomfort arising from the tissues of your spine. The spine is made up from a number of different structures, these include:

- Ligaments (connective tissue)
- Joints
- Muscles
- Intervertebral discs

Mechanical pain can affect any part of the spine from the neck to the middle and lower back. It can be triggered by everyday activities at home or at work, and can come on suddenly or develop over time.

## How is Mechanical Pain Diagnosed?

Mechanical pain is accurately diagnosed from the signs and symptoms you describe, alongside a physical examination. Most people do not need investigations as the diagnosis is made on clinical grounds alone.

## *What's wrong with me?*

Few people with pain affecting their neck or back can identify a specific cause for their symptoms. However it can come on during repeated bending or when performing very normal everyday tasks such as tying your shoelaces or picking up the kids. In most people the pain comes on without a specific cause.

Others will report their symptoms have developed gradually over time without a particular reason. Whether you are able to attribute a specific cause or not, lifestyle factors, stress and the way you use your body are all likely to contribute to your pain.

## *What are the main symptoms of mechanical pain?*

The symptoms most commonly experienced with mechanical pain include pain and stiffness in the affected area of your neck or back. The nature of pain can vary from person to person, though it is common that pain comes and goes with certain activities, while it is often described as being achy, sharp or catching.

Although people often associate sharp pains with nerve irritation, these descriptions are not reliable for diagnosing nerve problems, particularly if you do not have any pins and needles or numbness.

On occasions people with mechanical pain may find that they experience pain that extends into a limb. For example, people with neck pain may experience pain in the outer arm, while people with back pain may experience pain in the back of the thigh. Pain such as this is not

necessarily a sign of nerve irritation, as the joints and connective tissue that make up the spine can cause pain to refer into your limbs.

### ***How long will it take to get better?***

Mechanical pain affects around 80% of the population at some point in their life. If you have had back pain in the past, this does not mean you are any more likely to get it again. Usually if left untreated most people will find their pain naturally resolved over a period of six to twelve weeks. If your pain goes on for longer than this then is it possible that there are certain lifestyle, stress and activity factors that are prolonging your problem.

People with mechanical pain generally respond quickly to conservative management. However, it can take several months of exercise, pacing and pain medication before you see improvements in your symptoms and function. It is therefore important you perform exercises regularly for this period to see your symptoms improve.

### ***What I can do to help myself get better?***

Although mechanical pain can affect your quality of life, it is not serious or dangerous. Your spine is still strong and you should remain as active as possible.

Most people with mechanical pain can successfully manage their symptoms with conservative treatment options such as physiotherapy.

While it is common that people with spinal pain will look for someone to get rid of their pain, it is more effective to find a strategy that allows you to be in control and manage your symptoms.

### ***Summary: what are the key take home messages?***

- Mechanical pain is not serious, and can be effectively managed without surgery or injections
- It may take several months to see improvements
- Good days and bad days are normal
- Remain active and undertake exercise to improve your fitness
- Painkillers with exercise are more effective than on their own
- Use pacing strategies, rest and medication to increase your function
- Although activity maybe painful, you are not harming your spine