

What I can do to help myself get better?

Although pain affecting the neck and back 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.

If your symptoms are manageable then it is unlikely that an injection or surgery is needed. Most people with spinal pain can successfully manage their symptoms with simple less risky treatments, even if it is causing referred pain into the arm or leg. These are called conservative treatment options.

While it is common that people with these symptoms will look for someone to treat them, it is more effective to find a strategy that allows you to be in control and manage your symptoms.

Conservative treatment options

1. Managing pain

You can take over the counter pain medication. Your GP or pharmacist can provide further guidance on the risks of these and how to use them effectively.

If your symptoms are more nerve related, then discuss nerve pain modifying drugs (called neuropathic pain medication) with your GP.

2. Pace yourself

Pacing is a strategy to increase activity without increasing your symptoms. Start by establishing a manageable routine, for example:

At the moment, I can...

Walk for *minutes*

Stand for *minutes*

Lift *kg / lbs from one table to another*

Once you know what you can do, create a plan to increase it.

Begin by doing less than you do at present (say 80%), but do this more frequently through the day. Increase this gradually every few days to improve your activity tolerance.

3. Exercise

Exercise in a way that is tolerable to you and your symptoms.

Exercising with nerve pain may seem daunting, but it is an important element of managing your pain, even if you experience symptoms in the arm or leg. Improving your flexibility, strength and overall level of fitness is important in helping you manage your symptoms.

There is no evidence that one type of exercise is better than another, however, you should enjoy what you are doing.

You may initially find exercises that are low impact more comfortable, such as cycling on an exercise bike or exercises in water.

Use the pacing principles to judge how much exercise you should start with, and to increase your exercise over time. It is better to do a few exercises several times a day rather than all at once.

4. Lifestyle

Positive lifestyle changes such as gentle regular activity, exercise, stopping smoking, improved sleeping patterns and addressing contributing factors such as stress can significantly impact upon the amount of pain you experience, and the amount this limits you in daily life.

It is important that you have good sleep hygiene and thus a regular sleep pattern. Taking steps to reduce stress, and using techniques such as relaxation and mindfulness, can help you to better manage your symptoms and sleep. Research has shown that lack of sleep will “wind up” your nervous system (a bit like turning up the amplifier) causing you to feel more pain.

Although being overweight is not directly a risk factor for developing pain, leading an inactive and sedentary lifestyle can increase the risk of long term pain in the spine.

Weight loss does have numerous health benefits such as reducing the risk of lifestyle related cancers, type II diabetes, high blood pressure, and other cardiovascular problems such as heart attack and stroke.

Smoking can make you feel more pain as the release of harmful chemicals into our bodies slows healing and makes nerves more sensitive to pain. Smoking also increases the level of stress hormones, which also increases nerve sensitivity.

5. Posture

There is no evidence that slouched postures contribute to back and neck pain. However we do know that staying in one posture for too long will put strain on your back or neck. Therefore take steps to change your posture regularly by adapting your seating position and getting up

6. Physiotherapy

Physiotherapists are experts in helping people develop self-management strategies and developing exercise routines for individuals with pain and functional problems.

Individuals with nerve root pain may also find some physiotherapy treatments helpful in reducing their pain in the short-term; however these treatments will be offered in conjunction with advice and activities or exercises.

Treatments such as acupuncture, ultrasound and traction have no scientific basis for the treatment of neck, back or nerve pain and are no longer routinely offered.