

PROACTIVE STEPS TO RELIEVE CHRONIC BACK PAIN



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DEAR PATIENT,

You have been suffering from back pain for some time now. Discomfort of this kind can considerably impair your day-to-day life. Fortunately, this pain is rarely symptomatic of a serious physical disorder and you, yourself, can do a great deal to improve your quality of life.

This is where you can find out what chronic back pain means, its cause and how it is treated.

▶ THE HEALTHY BACK

The human spine consists of 33 bony vertebrae and the rubber-like discs between them. They act as a kind of shock absorber. Ligaments made of strong connective tissue and back muscles stabilise and support the spine.

In the course of everyday life your back has to withstand enormous strain. The spine is not just the body's stable axis bearing the weight of the head, arms and trunk; it is also elastic to facilitate movements like bending, stretching or turning.

Ongoing strain like sitting bent over or poor posture, a lack of physical exercise or obesity can, however, disrupt your balance. This can lead to pain.

▶ THE DISORDER

Back pain is pain in the back region below the arch of the ribs and above the buttocks. It does not include the neck or shoulder area.

This information is intended for people who have been suffering from non-specific back pain for months. Non-specific means that the pain cannot be attributed to any clear physical changes or disorders like, for instance, inflammation, tumours or disc damage.

At least 85 out of 100 people with back pain have non-specific symptoms. Around one in ten will go on to experience chronic pain.

▶ WHEN BACK PAIN BECOMES CHRONIC

Doctors use the term "chronic back pain" when the symptoms persist for more than 12 weeks. As a rule, various factors are involved when back pain becomes chronic. Often the body reacts when the following factors come together:

- acute pain
- incorrect, protective posture
- problems at work and at home.

People who do not heed the warning signals from their bodies and regularly put too great a strain on themselves, are also at risk.

▶ THE EXAMINATION

The basis for each examination is a review of your medical history which your doctor will record during a consultation. He will want to know as much as possible about the nature of your back pain. He may give you specific questionnaires to fill out. Don't be surprised if he asks you about your situation at work and at home. This can play an important role in the onset of chronic pain. You will also undergo a physical examination and, in some cases, further tests involving imaging methods like an X-ray.

▶ THE TREATMENT

The treatment will focus on efforts to encourage you to become more active and adopt a healthy lifestyle – as the slogan says "Use it or lose it!". Everything that tempts you to be passive, like staying in bed, is detrimental to your recovery. Medicines like painkillers are intended to enable you to keep up your everyday activities as far as possible. However, treatment with medication alone or on a permanent basis is not the answer.

▶ Chronic Back Pain

▶ THE TREATMENT

Further to the medical examinations and consultation, other non-medicinal methods can help you on your path to recovery. The treatment of choice is physical exercise. Your doctor will also examine the advantages of a multidisciplinary treatment plan. This entails involving, for instance, physiotherapists or occupational therapists in addition to doctors in your treatment. Various treatment options will be proposed to you and a dedicated team will look after you. More detailed information on the treatment options is given in the **Patient Guideline** (see box).

▶ WHAT YOU CAN DO

Even if you have been suffering from back pain for a long time, don't be discouraged. You can still do a great deal in order to increase your own wellbeing and prevent further pain.

- Don't be afraid of moving around. Taking things easy and inactivity encourage incorrect posture, tension and the renewed onset of pain. You should, therefore, endeavour to go about your normal daily activities as soon as possible.

▶ MORE INFORMATION

This Patient Information is based on the latest scientific findings and sums up the most important points from the Patient Guideline "Back Pain".

Other useful links

Patient Guideline "Back Pain"

www.patienten-information.de/patientenleitlinien

Self-help organisations and co-operation partners involved in the Patient Guideline

www.patienten-information.de/patientenbeteiligung/selbsthilfe, www.azq.de/pf

Self-help contact

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

Patient Guidelines

Patient Guidelines translate the treatment recommendations in medical guidelines into everyday language that can be understood by ordinary people. They provide important background information on the causes, examination methods and treatment of a disease. The BÄK (German Medical Association), the KBV (National Associations of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians) and the AWMF (Association of Scientific Medical Societies) working group are the co-ordinators of the programme for the development of medical guidelines ("National Medical Guidelines") and the respective patient versions.

- Build up your trunk muscles. This supports and reduces the strain on your spine. Swimming or walking are recommended. Pick a form of exercise you enjoy; then you will be sure to pursue it enthusiastically and regularly.
- Many people have the same problems as you. In self-help groups you can get together and discuss them and help each other.
- In back training sessions you will learn movements that alleviate existing discomfort, for instance the right way to sit, lift or carry things. Many health insurance funds work together with specialised fitness centres and bear most of the costs. Ask your health insurance fund.
- Back pain is only rarely caused by something serious. Nonetheless, keep an eye out for additional signs:
If you experience symptoms of muscle paralysis, numbness or difficulties in passing water or emptying your bowels consult your doctor immediately. These may be indications of a specific underlying disease that requires immediate medical attention.

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