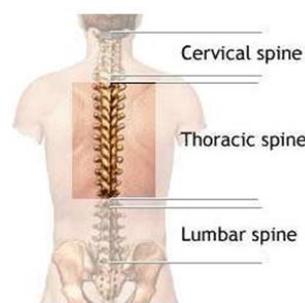

Managing Thoracic Back Pain

Introduction

The aims of this leaflet are to help you to understand what thoracic back pain is and to advise you how you can help manage your thoracic back pain. If you have any other questions that are not answered by this leaflet please ask your physiotherapist.



What is thoracic back pain

The thoracic spine is the middle part of the spine that runs in between the neck (cervical spine) and lower back (lumbar spine). It includes 12 vertebra (the bones in your spine) with ribs attaching to every vertebra, making it very stable and not as flexible as other areas of your spine.

Thoracic pain is not as common as neck or low back pain, but can be just as troublesome and painful.

The back pain may come on gradually and may be related to sitting for long periods of time or static postures, or sometimes may develop suddenly after twisting or lifting or doing a new activity that you are not used to. Symptoms can arise from sensitivity or irritation of any of the structures in the thoracic spine (muscles, ligaments, joints, discs etc) and it is often very difficult to be accurate about the exact cause of most pains. Episodes of pain can often last several weeks to several months and rarely require health care intervention early on. Keeping on top of pain control, continuing with normal daily activities as much as you are able and trying some self help measures is often enough.

Some people find their pain persists beyond these time frames, or comes and goes in episodes over long periods of time. This is called persistent or chronic pain, and we know that in the vast majority of cases there is no serious cause to this either.

Most thoracic pain is not serious and will improve with time and staying active.

However, if you develop any of the following symptoms:

- **weakness in both your legs**
- **difficulty walking, feeling unsteady, uncoordinated, legs giving way or feeling stiff**
- **recent changes to your bladder or bowel function such as new incontinence, unable to empty your bladder fully or straining to pass urine or numbness around your back passage or genitals**

you should seek medical attention urgently.

If you have :

- **a history of cancer**
- **unexplained weight loss over the previous 3 months**
- **your pain is constant and severe despite painkillers**
- **you have severe pain at night preventing you from sleep**
- **feel generally unwell, have a fever or night sweats**

you should discuss these symptoms with your GP.

How Can I help myself?

Most thoracic problems improve with time, but there are things that can be done to help this along as much as possible:

Getting adequate pain control, particularly early on as it has been shown that excessive or uncontrolled pain in the early stages can sometimes lead to a poorer outcome or slower recovery.

Getting appropriate sleep – sleep is when our body recovers and heals. Pain often interferes with the sleep cycle. Appropriate pain control can help, as well as considering factors such as avoiding caffeine late at night, getting sufficient activity through the day to make you tired and avoiding napping through the day. A small firm cushion between the knees when sleeping on the side, or several firm pillows propping up the knees when lying on the back, may ease symptoms

Trying to remain active wherever possible. It is well known now that avoiding activity because of pain or spending long periods sitting or lying appear to hinder rather than help in the long term. Muscles, joints and nerves get their blood flow through movement so remaining active can aid recovery and help manage symptoms.

Trying some exercises to keep your back moving. Movements of the back help to keep the joints mobile and stop them from stiffening up. They also show the body that movement is safe, which can influence how much it will protect or create pain. There are some exercises at the end of this leaflet that can be helpful in regaining mobility when you develop a back problem and they can sometimes help with short term pain relief. As a rule, don't do anything that causes excessive pain, but don't be frightened of it either, you may have to accept some discomfort when you are trying to keep active and do the exercises.

Relaxation/stress management techniques – the more we learn about pain, the more we realise the impact that low mood, fear and anxiety/worries can have on symptoms. Pain and uncertainty around the cause can lead to some of these emotions/feelings, which in turn can contribute to more distress and pain worsening. Understanding and recognising this in yourself can be important and strategies such as Mindfulness or Relaxation techniques can sometimes help.

Movement is good for your back. Exercise has been shown to be the most important thing you can do to manage your back pain in the long term. Any form of exercise can be beneficial in managing your pain, for example; walking, swimming, cycling, going to the gym, yoga, pilates or tai chi, but there are many other things you can do. Exercise can be any activity that increases your heart rate so you are slightly out of breath (a good test is if you can still hold a conversation). The stronger, fitter and more flexible your body is, the better your spine can adapt to the normal day to day demands placed on it.

When you exercise, your body produces more pain relieving hormones such as serotonin, endorphins and dopamines. These are your own natural painkillers. Many people with back pain feel better when they are exercising on a regular basis.

However, it is important to do something that you enjoy, otherwise you are unlikely to keep it up long term. Your body will produce more of the natural hormones if you are enjoying it at the same time.

It is important to build up the level of activity gradually, so that your body gets used to doing the new activity over a period of time. You may find it useful to set yourself goals to help you with this. Aim to eventually exercise for between 20 – 30 minutes every day.

Exercises

The following exercises can be useful to help maintain or improve your overall mobility as well as the mobility of your back which can aid recovery. You may also find some of the exercises useful for helping to relieve pain in the short term.

You don't have to do all of them, find the ones you feel most comfortable doing or which seem to help you the most and stick with those.

[Video](#)



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Exercises to improve the mobility

In sitting, place your hands across your chest and then twist round to one side and then the other.

Repeat 5-10 times.

[Video](#)



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Thoracic Spine Rotation

Lie on your side, legs bent and spine in neutral position. Arms bent beside your head.

Move your top elbow, over as far as you can to rotate your mid and upper back. Return to the starting position.

Repeat 5 times on each side

[Video](#)



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Thoracic Spine Rotation

On all fours, hands under your shoulders and knees under your hips. Spine in neutral position.

Reach one arm under the other armpit and then bring the arm back and reach towards the ceiling.

Note: Focus on the movement from your thoracic spine.

Repeat 5 times on each side

[Video](#)



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Active Trunk Flexion/Extension

On your hands and knees, hands under your shoulders and knees under your hips.

Round and arch your back by tilting your pelvis backwards and forwards.

Repeat 5 - 10 times.

[Video](#)



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Crawling position.

Let your arms slide along the floor as far as possible. Push your bottom back and down and the chest towards the floor. Breathe out while doing the exercise.

hold for 10-15seconds

[Video](#)



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Sit on a chair with a back rest. Support your neck with your hands. Arch back over the top of the chair. Try to extend your thoracic spine and not your neck.

hold for 5 seconds, repeat up to 5 times

[Video](#)



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Exercises to strengthen the back

Lie face down, arms by your side.

Tighten the muscles between your shoulder blades and push your chest forward. Lift your arms and upper trunk off the floor.

Hold 3 seconds.

Repeat 5 - 10 times.

[Video](#)



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Trunk Control in Four Point Kneeling, Arm Lift

On your hands and knees, hands under your shoulders and knees under your hips. Spine is in neutral position.

Lift one arm forward and then bring back to the starting position. Lift only as high as you can control the position of your spine. Repeat with your other arm.

Note:

- Keep your lower back in neutral position.
- Try to keep the weight shift sideways as small as possible.

Repeat 5 times on each side.

[Video](#)



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when you can lift your arm up in front with good control, progress to this

Bird-dog

On your hands and knees, hands under your shoulders and knees under your hips. Spine is in neutral position.

Lift one arm and opposite leg. Lift only as high as you can control the position of your spine.

Note:

- Keep your lower back in neutral position.
- Try to keep the weight shift sideways as small as possible.

Repeat 5 times on each side.

[Video](#)



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Bent-over Row without Equipment

Start in standing and bend over from your hips. Let your arms hang towards the floor, with your elbows straight.

Pull your elbows backwards and shoulder blades together. Straighten your arms back to starting position.

Repeat 5 - 10 times.

when this is easy, you can add in a small weight, such as a water bottle or tin of food in each hand

When to Seek Help?

As most back pain tends to improve with time, it isn't always necessary to seek medical attention, particularly in the first few months. Remaining active, keeping pain under control with medication and addressing lifestyle factors such as weight, sufficient sleep and managing stress can really influence your outcome and aid recovery.

However, if despite following this advice:

- You feel your pain is too severe and unmanageable
- There is a significant impact on your sleep that isn't being helped with medication
- Your pain is worse lying down
- You feel your symptoms are progressively worsening
- Symptoms have persisted for more than 6-8 weeks without any signs of improvement despite trying the exercises enclosed

then call TIMS to arrange an appointment.

For further information

Please email ghnt.newcastlegatesheadtims@nhs.net, ring on **0191 2138800** or visit our website at: www.tims.nhs.uk which provides online guidance and support on managing your musculoskeletal (MSK) condition effectively.

The NHS website also provides trusted online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare to help you manage your condition and/or inform your choices about your health: www.nhs.uk.

Useful links

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) can offer on-the-spot advice and information about the NHS. You can contact them on freephone **0800 032 02 02** or e-mail northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk.



Tyneside Integrated Musculoskeletal Service

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