

Back and Neck Conditions

Back and neck pain affect a large proportion of the global population and most people have experienced back or neck pain at least once in their life.

Back and neck pain can be classified as specific or non-specific. When the experience of pain is non-specific, there is no diagnosis that can explain it with any certainty, such as an underlying disease, pathology, or tissue damage. Approximately 90% of cases are non-specific. Low levels of physical activity, smoking, obesity, and high levels of occupational stress are some of the risk factors for non-specific lower back pain. Non-specific back and neck pain may also arise from the mechanical forces resulting from our daily activities such as the postures we adopt and the way we move.

Specific back or neck pain is often caused by underlying diseases (e.g. cancers), tissue damage (e.g. fractures), inflammatory conditions (e.g. ankylosing spondylitis and rheumatoid arthritis), or by other organs (e.g. kidney and aortic aneurysms). These conditions warrant medical interventions.

Most cases of acute back and neck pain resolve naturally and do not necessarily require treatment. Within the first two weeks of an acute episode of pain, most people will report a significant improvement in their symptoms. The general consensus is that there will be reduction in pain and disability within 4 to 6 weeks, after which pain and disability continue to improve in smaller amounts. However, it is important to seek immediate medical attention if the pain is associated with recent trauma, loss of limb strength or sensation, loss of weight or appetite, and loss of bladder or bowel control.

How is it treated?

For certain cases in the acute and inflammatory stage, doctors may prescribe painkillers to aid in the resumption of activities of daily living. Physiotherapists may also assist in the rehabilitation of back or neck pain by providing education for patients to understand their condition, as well guiding patients in restoring their physical function.

What does rehabilitation involve?

Rehabilitation aims to reduce symptoms of back and neck pain, and to restore physical function based on patients' goals.

The physiotherapist will conduct a detailed subjective and physical assessment to ascertain the diagnosis and formulate an individualised treatment plan. Treatment largely involves a home exercise program designed for improvement of physical function and education on self-management of patients' physical function in the long run. Manual therapy and other electrophysical agents may be utilised as an adjunct for pain relief.

In recent years, research has shown that back and neck pain is not solely attributable to structural abnormalities. High stress and poor understanding of pain can contribute to the perpetuation of pain. Therefore, educating patients to have a better understanding of pain and pain management is an important part of the rehabilitation process.

Useful websites

[WHO – Low back pain](#)

[15 things you didn't know about back pain](#)

[What about my protruding or bulging disc?](#)

[Information on acute and chronic low back pain \(Videos and FAQ\)](#)

[Neck pain](#)