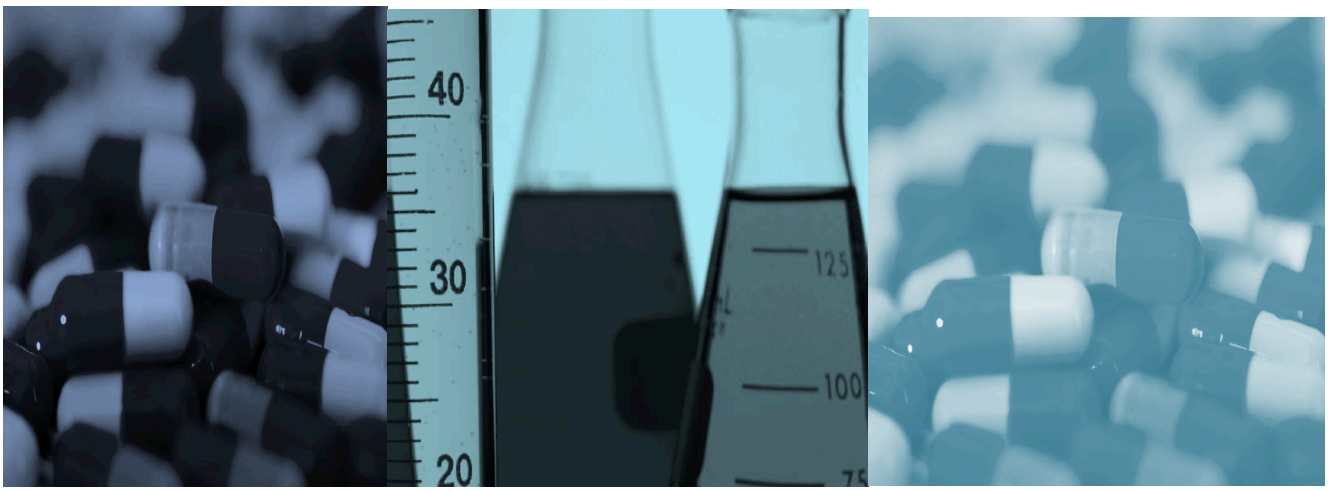
Hampshire Backs

Hampshire Hospitals NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

MEDICATION

For back pain



Taking medication to reduce the symptoms of back pain is an effective short-term treatment. This document describes different types of medication used to treat back pain, side effects and all that you need to know about taking medication. However it is important not to rely solely on medication to get rid of your pain. Including exercise and taking an active and healthy approach towards your lifestyle achieve the best results. Your body can get used to medication after a while so it will become less effective in reducing pain and symptoms. Therefore the aim here is to introduce you to the most effective short-term medication for back pain and also highlight the need to include exercise and a healthy lifestyle approach in order to achieve the best results.

The most common medications for back pain include **painkillers, anti-inflammatories and muscle relaxants**.

Please read this information and always consult your GP about the details.

Enjoy the reading,

Your Hampshire backs team

ABOUT PAIN

Pain is difficult to define because it is an individual experience and each person perceives and reacts to pain in different ways. However, understanding what the purpose of short-term pain is will be an important step towards better management, treatment and awareness. Short-term pain (lasting less than 10-12 weeks) is a protective mechanism, which sets off when your brain perceives threat, danger or damage. **Pain is an unpleasant feeling because it serves to alert you** about some potential danger such as when you burn yourself or fall. Often back pain can become very unpleasant and interfere with daily activities, work, sports and many other important factors in life. It is often **difficult to pinpoint to one structure where the back pain is coming from** but this should not disturb you. The pain you feel can come from various structures in the back (muscles, ligaments, bony parts, joints, nerves etc.) but it also depends on the evaluation of many inputs coming into your brain. It is important to remember that **pain depends on whether your brain thinks there is a problem and not how dangerous it really is**. This means that the intensity of pain does not directly relate to the extent of damage or injury. If the pain feels severe and interferes with normal activities, an effective short-term solution is to take some medication to control the pain. This will not resolve the problem fully but it will help you move, manage work and activities as well as to restore normal function.

MEDICATION LABELS: The same drug compound (Ibuprofen) often has several different brand names or labels (Nurofen, Brufen, Ibugel, Ebufac, Calprofen). What is discussed here refers to the original approved compound, which should be listed on the packaging of the brand named drug.

1. PAINKILLERS

Painkillers are used to reduce pain and they work by interfering with the pain signals from your brain. Do not wait till the pain gets severe in order to take painkillers. Many people feel they aren't effective because they are not taking them correctly. Painkillers can be taken before exercise, during flare-ups or to ease the pain until it improves. Painkillers do not act against inflammation therefore they are often used alongside anti-inflammatories. There are many types of painkillers, often classified according to their strength.

- **Paracetamol (Panadol):** These are suitable for mild to moderate pain and usually taken as a 500mg dose up to 4 times a day and causes very few side effects. Occasionally it can damage your liver if more than 4 000mg are taken per day and be careful if you have liver or kidney problems. Paracetamol is tolerated during pregnancy and breastfeeding if not taken regularly or more than 2 000mg per day. Cold and flu medication may contain paracetamol so be aware of this.

- **Co-codamol, co-dydramol**: These are stronger painkillers used for moderate to severe pain. They are called compound analgesics because they contain a combination of different drugs. This is usually a mix of paracetamol, aspirin, codeine and dihydrocodeine. Milder forms can be bought over the counter but most need a prescription. The side effects can cause nausea, constipation and loss of concentration.

- **Tramadol, Codeine, Morphine**: These are the strongest types of painkillers for severe pain called opioid analgesics. They are only available as a prescription. They have more serious side effect than other painkillers and can be addictive. The side effects include nausea, constipation, vomiting, dizziness, drowsiness, reduced concentration, confusion and reduced ability to breath. Usually they are used if other painkillers have not worked or as a short-term pain relief.

2. ANTI-INFLAMMATORIES (NSAIDs)

These non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs help reduce inflammation around the painful area. NSAIDs start working in a few hours and some effects can last a shorter duration than others. There are more than 20 different NSAIDs and the most common ones are Aspirin and Ibuprofen. Some NSAIDs are over-the-counter medications (Aspirin, Ibuprofen 200mg, Naproxen) but for others a prescription from a doctor is required.

- **Ibuprofen, Naproxen**: Is commonly used as a painkiller and anti-inflammatory. It is available over the counter in 200-400mg doses and is taken up to four times a day with food. It has reduced side effects (nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, indigestion) compared with Aspirin and is therefore more often prescribed. Ibuprofen creams and gels are also available and these are rubbed directly onto the painful area.
- **Aspirin**: Is used as a painkiller for mild to moderate pain as well as for inflammation and to reduce fever. It is available over the counter in 300mg tablets and normally used up to four times a day after food as a single or double-dose. Aspirin causes side effects such as stomach-related problems, bleeding in the digestive system (especially with high alcohol consumption, taking warfarin or age over 60 years). Do not use fish oil when you are taking Aspirin as they can interact and avoid this drug if you have heartburn, indigestion or a history of stomach ulcers. Aspirin can worsen asthma or cause rashes and hives. If you get any of these side effects, stop taking this drug. In low doses (75mg) Aspirin is used to reduce the risk of strokes and heart attacks but this does not provide pain relief and others NSAIDs must be taken with caution.

  Did you know that Aspirin is made from a chemical from willow bark and was used by Ancient Greeks for pain relief?
- **Diclofenac, Voltarol:** These are some of the other types of NSAIDs with similar effects.

Instructions: Use NSAIDs in the correct dosage with food and a full glass of water. If you miss a dose, take it as soon as possible with food and water. But do not double dose if it is time for the next dose and you have missed the previous one.

Side effects include stomach upset, mild nauseas, drowsiness, indigestion, heartburn, mild diarrhoea, it can interfere with high blood pressure, kidney problems, asthma and others.

What to remember:

- Read the instructions for use and follow the listed precautions and advice
- Do not take this medication if you have had an allergic reaction to NSAIDs and medications to treat fever, pain, swelling or arthritis
- Check with your GP that this medication is compatible with the ones you are taking
- Consult your GP is you have any bleeding, clotting problems or gastrointestinal bleeding
- Stop taking NSAIDs if you develop: severe nausea or abdominal pain, vomiting blood, recurrent nose bleeds, bruising, hives or swelling of the face, lips, tongue, wheezing, tightness in chest, seizures

3. MUSCLE RELAXANTS

Muscle relaxants are used to treat muscle spasms, which are often associated with back pain. The spasms can be painful as the muscles are continuously being activated to guard the spine but they can also make movement stiff and painful. Prolonged spasms are not helpful even though they may be effective as a healing response for acute pain. Muscle relaxants have an overall sedative effect on the body so they do not directly act on the muscles but more as a whole body relaxant.

- **Diazepam**: This drug is used to treat muscle spasms but also anxiety disorders or alcohol withdrawal symptoms. Diazepam works by affecting chemicals in the brain that may become unbalanced. Do not take this drug if you are pregnant, allergic, if you have severe liver disease, myasthenia gravis, breathing problems or sleep apnea. Do not drink alcohol when taking diazepam as this can increase the effects of alcohol. Side effects include drowsiness, dizziness, feeling irritable, muscle weakness, nausea, blurred vision, mild skin rash and dry mouth. The normal dose is 2-10mg taken up to 4 times a day
- **Baclofen, Dantrolen, Tizanidine** are other types of muscle relaxants
- **Dantrolene** acts directly on the muscles

WHICH MEDICATION FOR WHICH TYPE OF BACK PAIN:

Mechanical back pain Widely used are a combination of all 3 main medications: painkillers, anti-inflammatories and muscle relaxants but this depends on the severity and side effects of each individual. Therefore consult with your GP before taking anything.

What medications are used to treat nerve (neuropathic) pain?
Pain coming from nerves (such as in sciatica) can be a result of some damage to the nerves or nerve endings, which send pan signals to the spinal cord spontaneously or as a consequence of some stimulus that wouldn't normally cause pain. Nerve pain can be severe and debilitating therefore specific medications are used in combination with painkillers. Nerve pain medications include amitriptyline, gabapentin, pregabalin.

- **Amitriptyline**: This is an antidepressant drug, which has painkilling and sedative effects. It is used in low doses (5-75mg) before going to bed to treat nerve pain. The side effects cause drowsiness, dry mouth, constipation, blurred vision, difficulty passing urine (mainly in men with prostate problems), dizziness (more in the elderly) or irregular heart beat (take care if you have heart problems). You may feel drowsy in the morning, especially if you take Amitriptyline too late at night so try taking it no later than 8pm with a low dose.

- **Gabapentin and pregabalin:** These are also used to treat nerve pain in the most troublesome cases.

Speak to your doctor if you have any questions about medication.