

Athletes and Back Pain

Did you know that **70%** of people (including athletes) suffer at least one episode of debilitating back pain in their lifetime?

This can be extremely distressing and if the right treatment is not instituted the pain can take some time, up to a few months, to ease off or may even become recurrent. Most back and neck pain is due to injury to the soft tissues around the spine, such as ligaments and joints. This may be traumatic in origin, such as from a blow during sport or following lifting a heavy weight at the gym. Pain may also be due to excessive long-term postural stress on the ligaments or discs in the spine that causes the nerve endings to become irritated over time. This in turn can refer or radiate pain into the limbs ('sciatica') or cause muscles in the arms or legs do go into spasm and subsequently develop problems.

Early treatment may involve rest from the provoking activity and appropriate stretches to stiff spinal joints or muscles and strengthening exercises to stabilizing postural and weak muscles. Massage, heat and gentle manipulation also tend to help ease the spasm out of back muscles and restore proper motion to joints that may be stiff or locked up. It is important to try and keep as mobile as possible but avoid typically aggravating activities such as sitting. In more severe episodes short-term rest from any painful activity, ice, anti-inflammatory medication and investigative tests may be appropriate to exclude other causes of the symptoms. In both cases a strengthening program is usually of great benefit and may reduce the risk of recurrence of the pain.

Ongoing maintenance may be essential to keep the spine in optimum condition, just like any mechanical structure needs ongoing care! Physiotherapists have identified certain muscles that need to be in tiptop shape to stabilize your spine. Maintenance may firstly involve some spinal stretching and a number of exercises that first of all switch on the small stabilizing muscles of the spine then strengthen the larger, stronger ballistic or lifting muscles around the spine. Typically this can be done on the floor or on an exercise ball. Treatment may also work on loosening other muscles that may put pressure on the spine when stiff, such as the hamstrings in particular, strengthening muscles that may assist the spine, such as the gluteals with lifting or extending the leg during running, or realigning the lower limb and spine with orthotics. Maintaining a normal low back curve (lumbar lordosis) during weights or during high resistance work such as during scrumming is very important. Pilates and a number of other exercise disciplines all emphasize the importance of strong abdominal stabilization and maintaining neutral spinal curves during high load or sustained postures. [Click onto the links](#) to see some good back stretches and strengthening exercises.

It is important to liase with your physiotherapist until the pain has fully resolved and you have developed an effective maintenance program.

[You don't have to live with the pain!!](#)