

## Bath Pain Clinic



## Back Pain

### Advice for General Practitioners

Tel 01225 824331

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[www.ruh.nhs.uk/painclinic](http://www.ruh.nhs.uk/painclinic)

### Introduction

The RUH Bath Pain Clinic is a full multidisciplinary clinic. We have four part-time consultants, senior nurses who provide TENS and acupuncture, and both clinical psychology and rehabilitative physiotherapy.

We work alongside our local colleagues in Primary Care to deliver solutions for people who suffer from intractable pain.

This leaflet sets out to provide advice to General Practitioners to help you to manage back pain problems wherever possible, and guidance for referrals.

It is not possible for the advice in this leaflet to be exhaustive, and if you have difficulties, we recommend that you visit our website or contact us by letter or telephone.

### Mechanical Low Back Pain

About one third of patients who visit the RUH Bath Pain Clinic suffer from mechanical low back pain. Isolated back pain, without pain that radiates down either leg and not associated with worrying symptoms such as weight loss, is very common. The key to management is to maintain mobility, flexibility and strength. It is much easier to ensure a return to normal activities by intervening early, and we would like all our patients to have been given simple advice to remain active. Patients should be reassured about the nature of their problem; it is very important that complete rest is kept to an absolute

minimum. TENS is a simple intervention that may, where available, provide useful relief.

### Exercise

The overall message for patients is that it is important for them to stay active. This is particularly helpful for patients who suffer from low back pain. The vertebral column is supported by the muscles around the trunk, and muscle wasting will have a detrimental effect on back pain.

Exercise also improves mood, promotes socialisation, inherently provides pain relief and acts as a distracter from pain or other negative emotional experiences.

Physiotherapy assessments are of potential benefit. The assessment must be carried out by a therapist with a good understanding of pacing and the importance of a very gradual programme. Patients frequently run into difficulties if rehabilitation programmes are too ambitious for their needs.

**The Back Pain Network** provides access to early supervised exercise throughout the region. Patients should be advised to attend classes wherever possible. Local swimming pools also provide **GP Referral Sessions** when patients can go along and exercise gently in warm water on the advice of their General Practitioner.

### Pacing

Pacing involves the break-up of tasks, or exercise, into manageable amounts. It

encourages gradual achievement of goals and avoidance of setbacks.

Walking responds very well to a paced approach. Patients should start with distances (or durations) that they know they can manage, however short that is. They can then build up the distance or time very gradually from there.

### **Relaxation**

Pain is aggravated by stress and muscle tension. It also causes tension and stress. To break this vicious circle, consider information about relaxation, as well as relaxation tapes, as tools to help reduce stress and muscular tension.

### **TENS**

The Bath Pain Clinic provides a TENS clinic. TENS machines are small, battery-operated devices. They deliver a tingling sensation via two or four pads, applied to the skin over or near the site of pain. It can be worn all day. Rechargeable batteries are recommended.

Patients are invited to try a TENS machine on loan initially. If they get benefit from it and wish to keep it, they need only send a cheque to the manufacturers.

The Pain Clinic in Bath provides two appointments for patients, which covers the initial visit and instruction on the machine as well as a follow-up appointment to help with any problems that might arise. Patients who have

evidence of **Red Flags** (see below) should usually undergo further investigation before referral to the Pain Clinic. The presence of **Yellow Flags** (see below) suggests that early referral to the Pain Clinic is warranted.

### **Red Flags**

- Gross neurology.
- Sphincter disturbance.
- Saddle anaesthesia.
- Upgoing planters.
- Weight loss.
- History of malignancy.
- Recent significant trauma.
- Severe thoracic back pain.
- Severe bilateral leg pain.
- Spinal deformity.
- Severe constant night pain.
- Gait disturbance.
- Fever or night sweats.

### **Yellow Flags**

#### Personal

- Fear avoidance.
- Pessimism, depression, expressed stress, anger and sometimes sleeplessness.
- Illness behaviour and adoption of the sick role.
- Passivity (external locus of control)
- Helplessness.
- Tendency to see pain in a catastrophic light.

#### Social

- Family: beliefs, expectations, reinforcement.

- Work: job satisfaction, difficulty working with pain, flexibility of employer, work options.
- Non-health problems (financial, marriage?).
- Mobility and function.
- Restrictions on pleasures and hobbies.

## **Non-mechanical Low Back Pain**

Back pain may on occasion be associated with specific damage or disease. Back pain with pain radiating down one or both legs (often sciatica), or pain associated with recent weight loss or new neurological abnormality are examples of non-mechanical low back pain.

The Bath Pain Clinic is happy to take patient referrals in the case of recent onset sciatic pain, as this condition often responds to early treatment with either epidurals or with neuromodulatory medications. We are also very happy to see patients with pain and red flags, provided further investigation is underway or completed. The presence of red flags does not therefore preclude referral to the Bath Pain Clinic.

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