



Specialised Movements & Tips to Eliminate Back Pain & Stiffness



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10 Expert Tips on What is Advised & What is to be Avoided to Successfully Tackle Back Pain & Stiffness



A guide of the best information to help you to take control of your back issues and get back to being active without feeling restricted by pain and stiffness

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Introduction

Thanks for taking a copy of our back pain guide. My name is Graham Widger and I am the owner and head physiotherapist at Monkstown Movement Clinic, a small community-based physiotherapy practice in South Dublin. Our goal is to help you to get rid of your back issues once and for all and get you back doing the things you love without feeling restricted.

The aim of this guide is to help anyone that for some reason or another is unable to get rid of their back issues. Back pain is the most common complaint we see in the clinic and yet, unfortunately, it is often the most misunderstood and mismanaged. Too often we hear people who have been told to rest or just accept that their pain and stiffness is just part of the ageing process. Or that their back is damaged and they need to be careful or they will make it worse. This simply is not the case.

I hope the information here helps to guide and educate you on what is really going on with your back and how the misinformation you may have received before can actually make you worse.

I also hope that ultimately you can find a way to be rid of your back issues once and for all. And not just for a week or a month but for life. Such is our mantra:

MOVE without pain | MOVE with confidence | MOVE for life

If you have any questions or queries about anything in here or just want to tell us your story please don't hesitate to get in touch. We genuinely would love to get you active and pain-free.

Contact me at graham@mmcpphysio.ie and I will personally respond to every email I get. Or you can book a [Free Move without Pain Session](#) and meet us in person. We are happy to give friendly advice to anyone that needs it.

I hope you get moving the way you deserve to real soon.

Graham Widger

Monkstown Movement Clinic Owner & Head Physio

Who can benefit from this guide?

- Anyone that has ever **struggled with niggling back pain or stiffness**
- Those that have been **told that they have a 'bad back'** or have just accepted that they have a 'bad back' and now want to make a change
- **Active individuals** that are **struggling to maintain their level of sport and fitness** due to back complaints
- Any walker, runner, golfer, swimmer, cyclist, tennis player or similar that is **fed up being restricted by their back** and now hopes to feel strong, loose and free
- Those that have had **previous treatment** for their back and been **frustrated by the outcome**
- Anyone that is **fed up taking medications** and **wants to avoid unnecessary injections and surgery**
- Those that think that there is **hope** and are **ready to fix their back issues once and for all**

My Story

When I was young I played lots of sports. And unfortunately **I suffered lots of injuries**. By the time I was 23 I had undergone 3 knee surgeries and 2 wrist surgeries due to rugby injuries. Naturally this meant that I spent lots of time with physios over the years. This led me to a change in career as **I knew I wanted to help others**. Not just in terms of injury prevention and management but more in **how these injuries restricted people's lives, stopping them from moving and being active**.

For me, **it wasn't so much the pain that I found frustrating but more the feeling of knowing that I couldn't do what I wanted to**. Which was to play rugby. However, I made the tough call to step away as I didn't want to run my body into the ground at such a young age and in such a highly attritional sport. So **I had to learn to adapt and be smarter with my approach to my body**. I ran more, I cycled more, I practiced yoga and pilates, I played more tennis and golf and now I'm looking to get more into swimming.

How does pain affect us?

Now, not everyone will have to stop doing what they love - because not all activities will be as physically demanding as rugby. The point here is that **often the pain isn't the biggest issue, it's what the pain stops us from doing.** Rugby wasn't just a sport to me. It was my passion. It was where I felt free and felt I could express myself. And it was also where I made some of my best friends. And these things are so hard to replace. **So if you are reading this and suffering with back issues and getting frustrated by the effect it is having on your life, I feel for you. It's not easy.**

Pain can affect us in other ways too. By my second knee surgery, my orthopaedic surgeon advised that I call it a day. And while studying to be a physio, I learned that, statistically, I had a greater than 50% chance of having knee osteoarthritis before I turned 30. At the time of writing this I'm 35. If I didn't know better (luckily I do because I'm a physio ;)), I would be very worried about hearing things like this. I might be afraid to make my body worse and could become less active as a result. However, I know that these are just numbers. The most important thing is how my body feels. And **the important thing for you will be how your body is feeling.** Which might not be great now but **our focus will be to work to improve how you move and how you feel and progress this every day.**

Pain can worsen because of fear

These days, a lot of the patients I see are very focused on x-rays and MRIs and sciatica and disc bulges. And while all these are important, they don't show the full picture. I haven't seen an MRI of my knees in over a decade but if I did I'm sure they wouldn't look great! What's important is not how they look on a scan but how they feel when I'm moving. Which generally, with some good practice, is pretty good.

The reason I spend time mentioning this is to set the scene. **Our goal is to work with you to help you to move better.** Not to help your body look great in an MRI machine! We don't ignore the other stuff but our focus is on your movement. So if you are reading this and are in pain, I truly empathise. It's a tough place to be in and I hope that I can help in some way.

Fear makes us overly cautious. Fear that we have damaged our back and we don't want to make it worse can stop us from moving at all. This will make things worse.

Pain does not mean damage. This is key. If you've ever had a headache, you can understand this. Your head wasn't damaged, you were just experiencing pain there. Possibly from tension or stress. Our backs are the same. Often we hold too much tension there and then suddenly we bend down and we get stuck. Yes we are in pain but that doesn't necessarily mean damage. And if this pain lingers or occurs more than once we tend to worry more about our back. So we move less. Hopefully now you can see how pain and fear can contribute unknowingly to a 'bad back'.

And if you have been told scary things about your back, I want you to try to calm any fears. Breathe and relax. **For most people, there is light at the end of the tunnel.** You can see results and you can get back to doing what you love without pain or stiffness slowing you down. And if after you've finished this guide you're still worried about your back, give us a shout to see if we can help. Or contact me personally at graham@mmcpphysio.ie and tell me your story. I'd love to hear it to see if we can help.

Why do people get back pain?

There are many reasons why people get back pain. Fortunately, most causes are relatively straightforward and are very treatable. Simply put, **in most cases, back pain patients can get better and return to full activity.**

It has been shown that **up to 80% of people will experience some form of back pain** in their lifetime. Now if you are suffering with back pain at present, this statistic might scare you. However, **the aim of presenting this to you is to normalise back pain.** It's very very common.

My job with this guide is to get you thinking differently about your back. Because if you are reading this guide then chances are you suffer with low back pain. And if you do, you may be unlucky to suffer with persistent or chronic back pain. And that can be tricky to get rid of but I want to help you get there.

As we stated above, back pain is common. You would be doing very well to get through life never having experienced any back pain. It can happen like any injury. **Think of the back like any**

other part of the body. We can pull a muscle in our back, we can sprain something in there, we can get tight and irritable and we can get stiff. But most people don't talk about that stuff. Instead they go to **Dr Google** who will mention **sciatica, disc bulges, herniation, L45, L5S1, degenerative disease and other scary terms** that we may not fully understand.



This is part of the problem and it goes along with the **fear** element mentioned above. And the blame does not lie in you, the patient. But more in how this injury has been portrayed by health organisations and professionals. For example, if you presented with back pain to ten different physios, GPs, consultants, chiropractors, osteopaths, physical therapists they all might give you a different diagnosis for your complaint.

This is part of the problem. And this is why I, as a healthcare professional, am so passionate about helping those in need. Because I truly do empathise with anyone that is suffering. But I also know that **for most people, you can get better without medication or surgery.**

And remember, most people will experience some back pain. **If you are suffering, you haven't done anything wrong.** There is often no one reason for getting back pain but more a combination of events. Sure, sometimes it can be a simple case of overstretching suddenly or lifting something heavy and we feel like we've pulled something in our backs. Other times I've had patients say that they just went to tie their shoes and couldn't get up. Or they went to click their mouse and their back went.

The key to getting better is to understand that none of the above movements are wrong or bad. Lifting heavy isn't bad for you but maybe it was too heavy on that occasion. And overstretching isn't bad, maybe you were just very tight that day. And clicking a mouse is never bad for you, maybe work was just very busy that week and the back was very tense with stress.

It's crucial to understand where you are now and determine where you would like to get to. If you are struggling to walk Dun Laoghaire pier and back and want to return to doing that daily, at least you have a goal. We can work towards that step by step. If you can't finish a round of golf in Leopardstown or Foxrock without pain, we can look at your swing and you can gradually build

up your walking endurance until you can comfortably achieve this. If you're unable to play tennis in Monkstown, Glenageary, Sandycove and Blackrock and beyond due to too much discomfort and are frustrated because you miss seeing your weekly playing partners, we can assess your movement and develop a plan to get you back on court in no time. If you can't run up Killiney Hill anymore without pain, try increasing your walking, then adding in some strengthening, then hopping and then easing back to jogging. This rehab side of recovery often gets overlooked. This is where we can help.

The typical issues we see in the clinic

No one should have to suffer with their back. Everyday we see patients with issues such as:

- Feeling constantly stiff or achy
- Restricting their exercise and hobbies due to their back pain
- Struggling through basic activities like getting dressed or lifting the kids or grandkids because of the discomfort in their back
- Unable to work or sleep without experiencing pain
- Relying on medication to get through the day
- Living in fear of injections or surgery

There is another way. And this is where we specialise.

One of the biggest problems I think people have is **"who do you trust?"** As per the example above, which healthcare professional do you listen to if they all give different advice? Do you listen to your physio, do some exercises and have a few sessions with them?; do you listen to your GP and take some medication and get a scan?; or do you listen to your consultant and get an injection or surgery?

This guide aims to simplify these questions and give you a greater understanding of what is really going on with your back. And explain clearly what the evidence tells us you should be doing. It is also why we offer a [Free Move without Pain Session](#). This is because we know how daunting it can be to make a decision regarding your pain as you will be investing your time and energy into it and you don't want to be let down.

So in order to get the most out of this, I have a simple request. Starting now - forget what you know about back pain. Forget every horror story and bad outcome and 'what ifs' you may have heard or conjured up. Let's start fresh. We all know where the back is. That's enough for now.

What Can Go Wrong?

There are many types of injuries that can occur in the spine. The purpose of this guide is to give you the honest truth about these injuries and how best to recover.

As mentioned above, there are several different problems that can occur in the back. However, **current evidence encourages healthcare professionals like myself to avoid giving a specific diagnosis.** Instead, **we are advised to call most cases 'non-specific low back pain'.** Patients often don't like hearing this because we all want to know what is going on. However, if someone is running and they feel a pain in the back of their thigh, we can say with some confidence that they have strained their hamstring. In the back, on the other hand, it is very difficult to isolate the structure causing pain. So even though the pain might be sharp, we can't be sure that it's nerve pain. Or disc pain. It could be a simple muscle sprain, just like the hamstring example.

The difference is that we worry more about our backs. We might not know much about the anatomy of the back but we know the spine is in there and that's pretty important. And this kind of thinking is exactly why 'non-specific low back pain' makes sense. To avoid fear and catastrophizing which can stop us from moving and can make the pain worse. Yes disc bulges do occur but the research says that will get better in time. And yes sciatica also occurs but not nearly in as many people who think they have it.

Think about the two pictures below. One looks complicated and scary. The other, not so much. However, the structures in both pictures are capable of causing pain. It isn't always the discs and nerves and bones that are affecting us. Sometimes it's just the muscles.



Please remember, the aim of this guide is not to dismiss anyone's pain but instead to educate and inspire hope and action. If you have been told anything worrying about your back, please feel free to get in touch to assess your options. We will give you an honest assessment and hopefully find a way to get you moving better than ever.

10 Tips to Eliminate Back Pain & Stiffness for Life

1. Don't Panic

One of the worst things to do if you experience back pain is to panic and think negative thoughts. I want to stress that there is no judgement when I say that as I know well how easy it can be for it to happen. However, I also know that this can make the pain worse. Take this example:

Mary hurts her back. She seizes up and is afraid to move as she doesn't want to make it worse. She avoids bending, twisting and any other general back movements. She walks upright and is very careful with everything she does. She makes sure to rest up as much as she can. When she tries to get up, she finds she is stiff and sore. This has now been going on for some time. She is now very fearful of her back as she is terrified of when it might 'go' again. She has had an MRI scan which showed some 'wear and tear' and she is taking medication from her GP. Mary is convinced that she just has 'a bad back'. She has restricted her walking and golf. She misses her active life.

Questions: I want you to think about this scenario and answer the following:

- Is Mary's back pain serious?
- Could she have done anything differently?

- Do you think it's possible for her to get better?

[Hint: remember to forget what you think you know about back pain]

Physio answers:

- Yes and no. She does have a bad back because it is causing her considerable pain and frustration and it is persistent - but no in that she doesn't have any symptoms that would suggest her pain is too serious and she cannot get better.
- Yes. She could have behaved differently but she did what she thought was right and took the advice of trained professionals.
- Yes. She is a great candidate for physio and can definitely get her life back.

2. Do try to relax

Contrastingly to the above, one of the best things to do is to try and relax. I fully appreciate how hard this can be particularly when we may be busy with work, stress, family, life etc. The following scenario is where I use myself as a real example:

Graham wakes up with niggling pain in his back. He gets up and has breakfast with the family and tries to forget about it. But the pain persists. He tries to stretch and the pain gets worse. He was looking forward to a nice Saturday with his wife and kids and is keen to get his back moving better. He practices a few minutes of yoga, just does what he can and doesn't push his back too hard. He focuses on staying relaxed and gently stretching out his back gradually. He then uses a foam roller to loosen out his back and finishes with a hot shower. Luckily, he's meeting up with a friend later on who happens to be a physio. They do a bit of manual therapy and he follows it up with some more stretching. Both families go for a short walk down to Seapoint for a swim. They swim for about 15 minutes or so and then have a relaxed stroll home. Graham's back is still niggling a bit but he's not that worried anymore as it does feel as though it's getting better. Within 3 days of regular walks, stretches and some physio, his back feels 80% better. After that, he forgets about it and carries on as normal.

Questions:

- Is Graham's back pain serious?
- Could he have done anything differently?

- Do you think he will get back pain again?

Physio answers:

- Probably not. His symptoms suggest it was a simple case of 'non-specific low back pain'.
- There are many ways to settle low back pain. He also could have done some floor exercises, used regular heat and booked in for a proper physio session to be more safe and thorough
- Probably. Low back pain is extremely common but the better he can manage it, the more likely that it won't be too troublesome in the future.

Take-home messages

- The biggest difference between the two examples was in how the back pain was managed initially
- Our ability to normalise the pain, stay calm and work slowly through it can really help
- MRIs don't necessarily help (for all we know, Graham had a disc bulge or has wear and tear but he just never had a scan as it wasn't required due to good pain management)
- Nobody wants low back pain. Unfortunately some will have it bad. And the most unfortunate will not find a way to get rid of it
- Don't give up! Just because you have had pain for a long time, doesn't mean you will never be able to get rid of it
- Find help. Someone that listens to you and understands you. Then listen to what they have to say and pick the person you can relate to. You need to buy-in to their approach and it has to work for you
- Believing you can get better is the first step. Only then can we start thinking about how we can get there

3. Don't rest

I know this might sound crazy but sometimes rest can actually be the worst thing you can do. The reason for this is because rest leads to stiffness. And stiffness leads to pain. Pain leads to more rest. And round and round the cycle goes. Which ultimately leads to persistent nagging back pain.

A certain amount of rest, however, is absolutely acceptable. If you've had a hard week at work or the kids have you run off your feet, then of course you're entitled to put your feet up and get

some much needed relaxation. But if you find that after a few days of rest your pain is still not settling, then you have to start moving.

4. Do move

Hopefully you are starting to see how best to manage your low back pain. Gentle movements work best. In fact, the best thing you can do is simply go for a walk. Not marching up Killiney Hill, just a nice relaxing stroll on the flat. Along with that, you can try these exercises below:



- Lying on your back with your knees bent and feet on the floor. Roll your knees from side to side. Breathe easily throughout.
- Lying on your back, bring one knee up towards your chest. Give it a hug. Then relax and change legs.
- In sitting, rotate your body left and right.
- In sitting, slouch down towards your toes to stretch out your low back. Hold this stretch and repeat.

5. Don't push through pain

There's an old saying "no pain, no gain". Unfortunately this isn't always great advice. Pain is a symptom. It is our body's way of letting us know that something isn't right. So we should respect it. Little and often is a nice rule. Do a little bit of walking, moving, stretching etc and do it often. If you push your body too hard you can make things worse. Think about getting a crick in your neck after sleeping funny. We all know it won't last forever. So we do small movements to try loosen it out a bit and gradually in a day or so it settles down. The same should apply to your back. Don't force uncomfortable movements. Do what you can. And if everything is sore, find the

simplest, smallest movements that you can do and start from there. If you can't do that, you may need some help.

6. Do use ice or heat to help

It can be hard to know what to do when you get pain. Everyone says something different and how can you know what is right for you and your body? In general, ice is great for the early stages of an injury. Think about if you rolled your ankle or twisted your knee, the first thing you might think of would be to put some ice on it. The reason for this is to manage swelling and for pain relief. Ice can also be great for sharp, shooting pain or pain that travels down the leg. This pain that feels like a 'nerve' type of pain can often be caused by inflammation. Ice can help to tackle this. My advice would be to get some ice cubes, frozen peas or a cold pack, wrap it in a wet towel and apply the painful area for 15 minutes. Then remove and wait until the body area has returned to its normal temperature and then reapply as often as needed.

Heat on the other hand can be very useful for a stiff or achy back. If you feel sluggish in the morning or just feel that your back is tightening up on you, heat is great to loosen up the muscles and joints. It will work much like a massage or a hot bath or shower and tends to help to free up our movement.

However, there is no one perfect rule. Often patients with sharp pain say heat works great for them and ice can work great for the tight backs. If in doubt, listen to your body. If you're craving a nice hot bath, go with it. If you're craving a dip in the Forty Foot...be brave.

7. Don't focus on MRIs, X-rays or get too specific with the anatomy

As I've mentioned before, MRIs don't tell the full story. Most people have 'degenerative changes' in their back. Lots of people have bulging discs (and some of these have no pain!). No matter what you have heard, no one can definitely say that the 'wear and tear' in your back is the cause of your pain. That may sound strange but it's true. Remember what I said at the start, I've had 3 knee surgeries. An MRI of either of my knees probably wouldn't look great. But an MRI alone cannot diagnose me because I feel fine. My knees could look awful on MRI though. Think about your back in the same way. You may have degenerative changes or a disc bulge or a pulled muscle or stiff joints. But don't get too hung up about it. I've lost count of the number of people

who tell me about their L45 or L5S1 problems. But they don't really understand where these are or how they contribute to pain. Because MRIs are only relevant when taken in context with a full history. Talking to you, understanding your story, what you've tried before, what worked and what didn't work, what you feel is the issue, how you feel about your pain now and what you would do if your pain was gone. These are the important things for most people and often the key to getting better when other methods fail.

8. Do get some hands-on treatment

Pain is very complex. If you've ever banged your elbow, what's the first thing you do? Rub it of course. We all do it, it's normal. But why do we do it? At a deeper level, it's because the rubbing acts as a distraction to the pain. Simply put, we can reduce the pain we feel at that moment by rubbing our skin. Now if you have back pain, physio treatment can have similar effects. The input of physio and massage to our body can change the output of pain or stiffness in the body. This is a simplified version but hopefully it makes sense. Pain is processed in the brain, not in the back. The hands-on treatment to the back sends messages up to the brain, where we feel pain, and tries to reduce it. The muscles which have been feeling tight begin to relax. We feel less tense. We stop protecting our spine and movement becomes easier. This is why physios do lots of work with their hands to the body. We know it can contribute to positive pain relief and get the ball rolling if you will in terms of getting better. And if we combine this with movement, exercises, stretches, ice/heat, relaxation etc all done correctly, that's when patients can get great results.



9. Don't give up

Back pain can be crippling. It's there when we get up, it's there when we sit for too long, it's there when we try to be active and it's there when we go to bed. Whenever your pain or stiffness is there, if you are reading this chances are you've had enough. And reading this is a great step in the right direction. There is a lot of theory here. There is a reason for that. Some people won't agree with a lot of what I've said. They might think that their back is damaged and no amount of relaxing or moving or physio can get it better and they just have to accept that they have bulging discs and they just need help to manage it but it has to be done with needles or ultrasound or a particular stretch as that's the only thing that they like. I've heard this a lot of times. No matter what I say, the patient just can't accept that a new approach will work for them. And yet they would sooner suffer than give it a go. Now again remember, this guide is meant to educate, not criticise in any way. Often these patients have been failed somewhere along the way. Someone gave them bad advice or didn't listen to them or dismissed their pain and then it went on for so long that now they can't remember what it was like not to be in pain. And they are often scared about never feeling right again and find it difficult to trust anyone. If that sounds like you, I really feel for you. But please, don't give up. Read this again if you have to and try to forget anything negative you've been told in the past. You can get better. If I told most people that they had to run a marathon in one weeks time they'd think I was crazy. If I told them that they had to walk for 20 minutes in one weeks time they'd probably think it sounds ok. The walking is just the first step towards the marathon. You need to break down your goals into baby steps. So think about what you would like to do if you didn't have back issues. Now break down the first steps you need to take in order to get to that level. Which leads us to our final point.

10. Do take action

I truly believe that we are all capable of so much in this life. I also believe that it is so unfair that many of us suffer with back pain. However, we are all different. And we will all respond differently to pain. Wherever you are right now, the most important thing is to take action. Again, this is why I wrote this guide. It isn't to try and trick anyone into booking in for a physio session. It is about stating our approach to managing back pain and how we truly believe physio can help. But if what I've said here isn't for you, that's absolutely fine. Keep searching for someone that you can relate to and you believe can get you better. The key is to act. Don't let weeks,

months or years go by. Life is busy and stuff gets in the way. But if you are struggling at all, take action and get in touch.

What to do next?

We hope that this guide has been of some help to you and if you are able to get relief from the tips and exercises we've suggested that's fantastic! If you still need some help and our approach to back pain feels right to you, here's how you can get in touch.

Option 1: Book a [Free Move without Pain Session](#)

Booking in with a new therapist can be daunting. You may have no experience with a physio or worse, you may have had a less than pleasant experience before. As such, we invite you to come into the clinic for a no obligation, 100% complimentary session. We will meet you and listen to your story and if we feel we can help, we will clearly explain this to you. If you don't think it is for you, you're free to go!

Option 3: Book in for a [Paid Consultation](#) with one of our expert physiotherapists

If you're ready to come in for a consultation, please get in touch and we can organise to get you to come in whenever suits. We look forward to helping you on the road to better movement. Click the link above, call us on (089)2565709 or email graham@mmcphysio.ie to request an appointment.

Closing thoughts

I really hope you have found the information here useful and that it can help you on your way to feeling better. Our goal will always be to get more people moving freely and living active, healthy lives.

You might not agree with everything in here but the key take-home message is **most people with back pain can get better**. So don't give up.

If you like what you read, please get in touch and say hi. Let us know what resonated with you and what changes you made that made a difference. Or if you still need help, reach out to graham@mmcpphysio.ie for friendly, professional advice.

Thanks again for taking the time to read our guide.

Keep active and stay safe.

Graham Widger BSc MSc MISCP
MMC Clinic Owner & Head Physio

***Disclaimer: This guide is for informational purposes only and is not intended to replace professional medical advice. This guide book provides recommendations to help with low back pain and neither the author, nor Monkstown Movement Clinic can be held responsible should the advice not have the desired effect. If you are in any way worried that your symptoms may be indicative of a serious pathology, you should disregard this guide and seek medical advice immediately. The reader assumes full responsibility for any adverse outcome upon following advice from this booklet and neither the author nor Monkstown Movement Clinic can be held responsible for any adverse outcomes should the advice be carried out in an irresponsible fashion by the reader. ***