

FACT SHEET — TREATMENT OPTIONS

Physiotherapy for Back Pain

What physiotherapy involves, what it can achieve, and how to get the most from it

Physiotherapy is one of the most evidence-based treatments for back pain. Physiotherapists are trained in clinical assessment, manual therapy, exercise prescription, and rehabilitation. They are regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and must be registered to practise in the UK.

What physiotherapists do

Physiotherapy takes a broad, function-based approach to back pain management. Rather than focusing primarily on the structure causing pain, physiotherapists focus on restoring function — what the patient can do — and building the capacity to maintain that function independently. This is reflected in the strong emphasis on exercise, self-management, and education.

Assessment and treatment

Clinical assessment	Detailed history, movement testing, neurological assessment, and specific orthopaedic tests.
Manual therapy	Joint mobilisation and manipulation, soft tissue work, and neural mobilisation are all within physiotherapy scope of practice.
Exercise prescription	Individually tailored exercise programmes addressing core stability, strength, flexibility, and cardiovascular fitness.
McKenzie method	A specific approach to back pain using repeated end-range movements to diagnose and treat directional preference. Widely used in physiotherapy practice.
Pain neuroscience education	Explaining pain mechanisms to patients to reduce fear-avoidance and improve outcomes.
Graded activity and graded exposure	Systematic increase in activity and confrontation of feared movements.
Electrotherapy	TENS, ultrasound, and other physical modalities for pain management.

NHS versus private physiotherapy

NHS physiotherapy is available through GP referral or self-referral (First Contact Practitioner services in many areas). Waiting times vary. Private physiotherapy offers faster access and typically more time per appointment. The clinical approach should be broadly similar.

Getting the most from physiotherapy

- Do the home exercises — the treatment between sessions is more important than the session itself
- Tell your physiotherapist what is and is not working so they can adjust the approach
- Ask for a clear explanation of your diagnosis and prognosis
- Ask what the goal of each exercise is — understanding the purpose improves compliance
- Expect gradual progress, not immediate cure — and some temporary increase in pain with new exercises

Related fact sheets

Manual therapy for back pain	The broader context of manual therapy.
Osteopathy for back pain	The osteopathic approach.
Pilates and yoga for back pain	Exercise-based approaches within physiotherapy.
Why self-management produces better long-term outcomes	The evidence for active rehabilitation.

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