

FACT SHEET — TREATMENT / SELF-MANAGEMENT

Why Self-Management Produces Better Long-Term Outcomes

The evidence for active rehabilitation over passive treatment alone

One of the most consistent findings in back pain research is that active self-management — exercise, education, and building your own capacity to manage pain — produces better long-term outcomes than passive treatment alone. This is not a reason not to see a practitioner. It is a reason to understand what you are trying to achieve from that treatment.

The passive treatment trap

Many people with back pain seek passive treatment — manipulation, massage, acupuncture, injections — and experience temporary relief, only to find the pain returns when treatment stops. This cycle creates a dependency on external intervention and does not build the internal resilience that produces lasting change.

Passive vs active treatment

Passive treatment does something TO you. Active treatment gives you tools to manage your own condition. The evidence consistently shows that combining passive treatment with active rehabilitation — where the passive treatment creates a window of reduced pain in which active rehabilitation can occur — produces the best long-term outcomes. Passive treatment alone is rarely sufficient for lasting change.

What the evidence shows

- Exercise therapy has Level 1 evidence for chronic back pain — the highest level available
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) combined with exercise produces better outcomes than either alone
- Pain neuroscience education reduces fear-avoidance and improves outcomes
- Patients who understand their pain report less disability than those who do not
- Self-efficacy — belief in your ability to manage your own condition — is one of the strongest predictors of recovery

What good self-management looks like

Regular movement	Walking, swimming, cycling, Pilates, yoga — consistent, moderate activity maintained over months and years.
Understanding your pain	Knowing what your back pain is, why it persists, and why movement is safe despite being uncomfortable.
Sleep	Prioritising sleep quality. Poor sleep amplifies pain significantly.
Stress management	Chronic stress amplifies pain perception. Managing stress is part of managing back pain.

Healthy weight	Reducing excess spinal loading through weight management where relevant.
Using professional support appropriately	Seeing a practitioner to get a clear diagnosis, an exercise plan, and guidance — rather than for ongoing passive treatment indefinitely.

Related fact sheets

Central sensitisation and chronic pain	Why self-management targets the nervous system, not just the tissues.
Pilates and yoga for back pain	The most evidence-based self-management exercise approaches.
Fear-avoidance and back pain	Overcoming the fear that prevents active rehabilitation.
Pain neuroscience education	Understanding pain as part of treatment.

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