

## FACT SHEET — SPINAL — MECHANICAL

# Lumbar Muscle and Ligament Strain

*The most common cause of back pain — what it is, why it happens, and how to recover well*

Lumbar muscle and ligament strain is the most common cause of acute back pain. It accounts for the majority of back pain presentations seen in general practice and spinal care clinics. Despite being extremely common, it is often poorly understood — and that misunderstanding can significantly slow recovery.

## What it is

The lumbar spine is supported by an extensive system of muscles, tendons, and ligaments. These structures can be overstretched or partially torn through sudden loading, awkward movement, or gradual accumulation of stress. The resulting pain is often sudden, severe, and alarming — but it is almost never dangerous.

### The most important thing to know

Muscle and ligament strain, however painful, does not damage the spine. The pain is real and can be severe, but the underlying structures heal well. Fear of movement and excessive rest are the two things most likely to make recovery slower.

## Common causes

<b>Sudden loading or lifting</b>	Picking up something heavy with the spine in a flexed position is the classic mechanism. The injury often happens not on the heavy lift but on the unguarded moment — picking up a bag, twisting to reach something.
<b>Sustained awkward posture</b>	Long periods of sitting, driving, or working in a position that loads the spine asymmetrically accumulates stress in the supporting structures.
<b>Deconditioning</b>	The muscles supporting the spine weaken with inactivity. A deconditioned spine is more vulnerable to strain from loads it would previously have handled easily.
<b>Sudden increase in activity</b>	Starting a new exercise programme, an unusually physical weekend, or returning to sport after a break can overload muscles not yet conditioned for that demand.
<b>Repetitive loading</b>	Repeated bending, twisting, or lifting — common in manual work, childcare, and gardening — accumulates micro-stress in spinal structures over time.

## What it feels like

- Sudden or gradual onset lower back pain, often with muscle spasm
- Pain typically localised to the lower back — does not travel below the buttock
- Worse on movement, better with rest initially
- Muscle tightness and reduced range of movement

- Pain on getting up from sitting or getting out of bed
- No pins and needles, numbness, or leg weakness

#### ■ See your GP if:

- Pain is not improving after 4–6 weeks of appropriate management
- Pain is constant, worsening, or present at rest and at night
- You develop any leg pain, tingling, or weakness
- You have fever, unexplained weight loss, or feel systemically unwell
- You are over 50 with no clear mechanical cause

## How to recover well

<b>Stay active</b>	The most important thing. Gentle movement — walking, swimming, everyday activities — promotes healing and prevents the muscle weakening that comes with rest. Avoid complete rest beyond the first 48–72 hours.
<b>Use pain relief appropriately</b>	Anti-inflammatories (ibuprofen) and paracetamol can help manage pain enough to stay active. Take as directed. Do not use medication as a reason to do things that significantly worsen pain.
<b>Apply heat</b>	Heat (a hot water bottle, heat pad) relaxes muscle spasm and can significantly reduce pain. Apply for 15–20 minutes several times a day. Cold packs in the first 24–48 hours can help with acute inflammation.
<b>See a spinal care practitioner</b>	An osteopath, physiotherapist, or chiropractor can assess the specific structures involved, provide manual therapy to reduce spasm and restore movement, and give you a structured rehabilitation plan.
<b>Address the cause</b>	If the strain was caused by a workstation, a lifting habit, or a recurring activity — that needs to change. Recovery without addressing the cause leads to recurrence.
<b>Gradual return to full activity</b>	Do not wait until you are completely pain-free before returning to normal activities. Gradual, progressive loading is what builds the resilience to prevent future episodes.

## What to expect

Most episodes of lumbar muscle strain resolve significantly within 2–6 weeks with appropriate management. Complete recovery from a significant strain may take 8–12 weeks. Recurrence is common — up to 70% of people who have one episode will have another. The single most effective thing you can do to prevent recurrence is maintain regular physical activity and build the strength and resilience of the muscles supporting your spine.

## Related fact sheets

<b>Disc herniation</b>	When disc pain is the cause rather than muscle strain — how to tell the difference.
<b>Why self-management produces better long-term outcomes</b>	The evidence for active rehabilitation over passive treatment.
<b>Pilates and yoga for back pain</b>	How structured movement rebuilds spinal resilience.
<b>Fear-avoidance and back pain</b>	Why fear of movement slows recovery and what to do about it.
<b>Facet joint syndrome</b>	Another common cause of acute back pain — similar presentation, different structure.

## Get your personalised report — or speak to a specialist

To receive this fact sheet by email, or to book a consultation, use the options below.

<p><b>Get this report by email</b> Enter your details and we will send you this fact sheet with your personalised assessment summary.</p> <p><b>Your name</b> <input type="text"/></p> <p><b>Email address</b> <input type="text"/></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Send Me the Report</b></p> <p>Your details are used only to send your report.</p>	<p><b>Book a consultation</b> Speak with a specialist about your back pain. Leave your details and we will be in touch.</p> <p><b>Your name</b> <input type="text"/></p> <p><b>Email address</b> <input type="text"/></p> <p><b>Phone number</b> <i>Best number to reach you</i> <input type="text"/></p> <p><b>Best time to call</b> <i>e.g. mornings, weekday afternoons</i> <input type="text"/></p> <p><b>Preferred contact method</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> Phone    <input type="checkbox"/> Video    <input type="checkbox"/> Email         </p> <p><b>Briefly describe your back pain</b> <i>Main concern and duration</i> <input type="text"/></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Request a Consultation</b></p> <p>We aim to respond within one working day.</p>
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