

back pain

information for patients

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Pharmaceuticals Ltd



live life, manage pain

Managing Pain

At some point in our lives we will all experience physical pain, whether it is from a sporting injury, an accident or just everyday pain like headaches and muscle pain. Unfortunately many of us will also experience pain that goes beyond this and continues for a long period of time, we call this Chronic Pain and it is usually defined as pain that continues for more than 3 months after the usual recovery period.

Back pain is one of the most common types of pain and can have a huge impact on your quality of life, your work and social life and your personal relationships. This booklet aims to help you understand more about the different types of back pain, how you can manage your back pain and tips and techniques to help you carry on living your life!



The Back and Types of Pain

The back is a complex structure and this complexity unfortunately means that it often gets injured. Back pain can originate in the muscles, joints, bones or nerves and can be combination of pain from different areas. Back pain can also be a symptom of other underlying problems in the body such as abnormalities to the abdomen, pelvis or chest, we call this referred pain.

Some types of Back Pain:

Back Pain- The Nerves

Nerve root syndromes: A nerve root syndrome simply means a nerve is being irritated. Hernias and

Sciatica are examples of pain where the nerves are directly affected.

Sciatic pain is a symptom of nerve root syndrome, in this case there is pressure or damage to the sciatic nerve. This nerve starts in the spine and runs down the back of each leg. This nerve controls the muscles of the back of the knee and lower leg and provides sensation to the back of the thigh, part of the lower leg, and the sole of the foot. Sufferers may also feel pain in their legs, hips and feet as well as in their back.

Herniated discs develop as the spinal discs degenerate or grow thinner. The jellylike central portion of the disc bulges out of the central cavity and pushes against a nerve root.

Back Pain- The Joints

Spinal Stenosis: Spinal disc degeneration coupled with disease in the joints of the lower back can lead to spinal-canal narrowing (spinal stenosis). These changes in the disc can usually be seen on an X-ray. A person with spinal stenosis may have pain radiating down both legs while standing for a long time or walking.

Spondylosis occurs as intervertebral discs lose moisture and volume with age, this decreases the disc height. Even minor trauma under these circumstances can cause inflammation and nerve root impingement.

Back Pain –The Muscles

Musculoskeletal pain syndromes that produce low back pain include myofascial pain syndromes and fibromyalgia.

Myofascial pain is characterized by pain and tenderness over localized areas (trigger points) and loss in the range of motion in the involved

muscle groups. Relief of pain is often reported when the involved muscle group is stretched.

Fibromyalgia results in widespread pain and tenderness throughout the body. Generalized stiffness, fatigue, and muscle aches are reported.

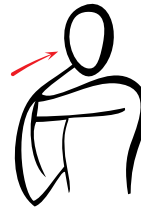


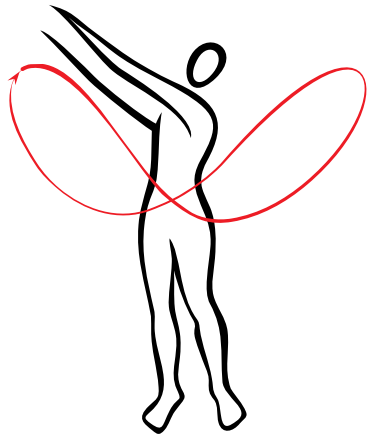
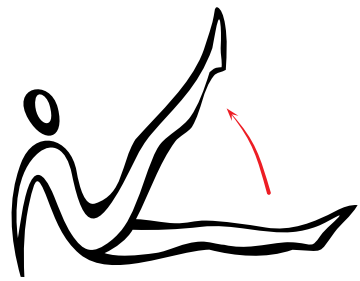
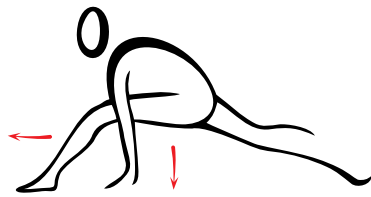
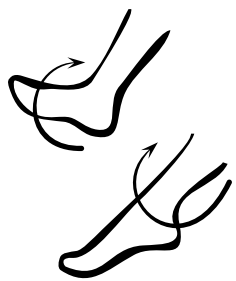
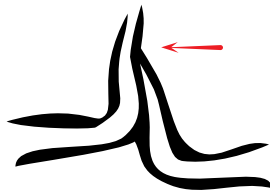
Taking Care of your Back.

Staying active.

Many of us lead quite sedentary lifestyles spending hours in front of the computer or television. It is important that you sit properly when at your desk and take regular breaks. Poor posture can lead to back problems. Regular exercise is also important for keeping the body flexible and also to avoid weight gain which can put additional pressure on the spine, muscles and joints.

If you are experiencing back pain you should try to continue your daily activities as normally as you can. In the past, bed rest was often prescribed, but this has now been shown to be counterproductive. Many people find that doing some gentle stretches gives them some reduction in discomfort.





How to Sit Correctly



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Medication

In some cases the back pain might be too severe to continue your daily activities. In such cases you should visit your GP. For back pain that is not acute there are over the counter painkillers that may help.

Many recommend you should first try paracetamol, if that doesn't give you sufficient pain relief, you could try ibuprofen. You should discuss any concerns you have about medication with your GP or pharmacist, especially when you are taking these medications over prolonged periods of time.

Back pain can be indicative of other problems in the body so if you are experiencing recurring or prolonged pain you should always get it checked out by your GP, they will also be able to advise the best form of medication for managing your condition.

Hot and cold packs

Some people find that applying hot or cold packs to the painful area can give some pain relief. There are special hot or cold packs available in most pharmacies, however you can also improvise by, for example, using a bag of frozen peas as a cold pack. It is advisable not to apply the hot or cold packs directly to the skin, but to wrap the packs in a thin towel or cloth.

Choosing between applying heat or cold is often a matter of trying; some prefer hot packs while others get more pain relief from cold packs. If you think the back pain comes from a muscle sprain or tear, it is probably better to try hot packs first. If you think that the pain originates from an inflammation, it would be better to apply cold packs. Try it out, and you'll see what works best for you.

Keeping track of your pain.

With any type of pain including back pain it can be useful to keep a track of how you are feeling, particularly if you are experiencing pain over a long period of time or experience recurrent pain. By keeping a record you will be better able to explain to your doctor the pain you are dealing with and will also be able to measure the benefits of actions you are taking such as exercise and medication. A simple pain diary help you to take control of your pain. You can start your pain diary today on www.paintracker.ie you will also find other resources here

to help you manage your pain.

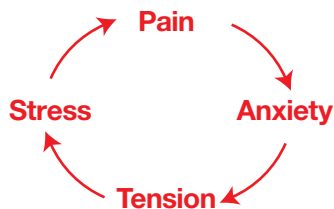
www.chronicpain.ie

Most importantly don't ignore it! Talk to your GP

The majority of back pain patients are diagnosed with nonspecific acute back pain which has no serious underlying pathology. However, secondary back pain can also be caused by an underlying condition which is why it is important that you don't ignore back pain.

Relaxation

Learning to relax is really important when it comes to managing your pain. Anxiety, tension and stress can make the pain worse. Also, the pain itself can lead to anxiety, tension and stress, so it's like a vicious circle. The trick is to break this cycle, relaxation can help you to do this.



Getting started

It sounds easy, but learning to relax takes time. You have to practice every day. Don't be too ambitious when you first start. It's best not to try the techniques if you're having a really bad day, as they probably won't

work. However, as you get better at relaxing, you will be able to use the techniques when you are having a bad day, and you will even be able to practice when you're out and about, standing in a queue, sitting in the car, etc. You might find it useful to keep a relaxation diary. Make a note of the type of relaxation exercise you did, when and where you did it, and how it felt. This diary should help you to see an improvement in your relaxation skills.

A quickie!

Use this quick, simple relaxation exercise whenever you feel tense. You can use it anytime, any place, when you're sitting down or even in crowded places.

- Take one good, deep breath.
- Keep breathing slowly and deeply.

- Let your shoulders droop.
- Relax your hands.

One for your muscles

This exercise takes about 10 minutes. Try to practice it as often as possible, once a day if you can.

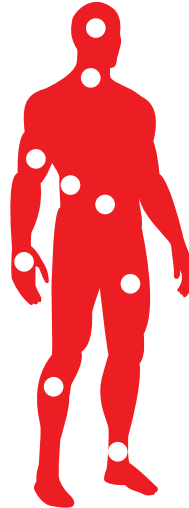
Step 1. Get prepared

- Find somewhere quiet. You might like to play some soothing music.
- Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down (on your front, back or side). Make yourself comfortable, e.g. you might want to bend your knees.
- Close your eyes and breathe deeply.
- Relax your body, let it go all loose and floppy.

Step 2. Relax your muscles

- As you breathe in and out, relax all the major muscle groups in turn.

- Start with your feet. Is there any tension? If there is, release it and relax, at the same time, say 'my feet feel calm and relaxed'. Do this three times, then move up to your calves, bottom, and so on.



1. Feet
2. Calves
3. Bottom
4. Back
5. Tummy
6. Hands
7. Arms
8. Neck
9. Face & Neck

**Do Steps
1 and 2
three times.**

Calm your thoughts

Stay fully relaxed, and breathe slowly and regularly. Distract your mind by thinking about a relaxing, pleasant scene or playing some soothing music.

For example, imagine that you are in the countryside on a sunny summer afternoon. Imagine that you are slowly walking on your own through a field, you can feel the warmth of the sun streaming down from the blue sky. You can see the grass, the trees and the flowers in the field.

You can hear the birds singing and in the distance you can hear children's voices. Feel the ground beneath you as you walk, and walk slowly, looking at everything around you. Think about what you can see, hear, smell and touch. Focus all your thoughts on this scene and remove any other thoughts or worries that may come to mind.

Spend five minutes fully relaxed physically and mentally.

When you want to get up, count backwards from four to one. You will hopefully feel refreshed, wide awake and calm. Keep this feeling with you when you carry on with your daily routine, and don't rush around too fast. Stay as calm as possible.

And finally...

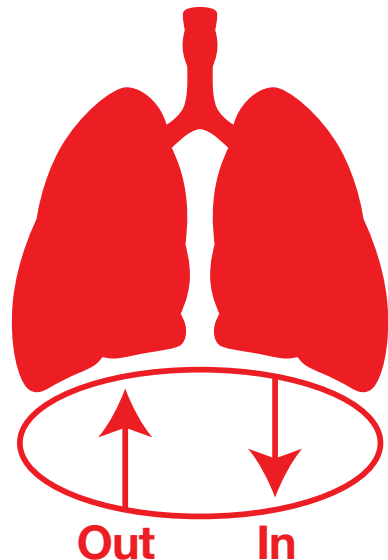
You can practise any of the exercises described above on your own, but why not consider joining a yoga or gentle movement group? For example, Dru Yoga is particularly suitable for people with pain or disabilities.

Diaphragmatic breathing

The way that you breathe is very important when you are in pain. This may sound strange, as breathing is something we don't usually think about! However, when you are in pain, your breathing may be shallow or you may find that you are holding your breath. This can lead to tension. As we discussed in the section on relaxation (Pages 2 - 4), tension can make your pain worse. The trick is to take time to think about your breathing, making sure it is slow and relaxed. The exercise described below can help you do this.

Your diaphragm is a band of muscle that sits just below your lungs. It helps you to breathe by moving up and down, forcing air in and out of the lungs. Normally, this happens spontaneously, you don't have to think about it. However, there is a technique called 'diaphragmatic

breathing', in which you deliberately use your diaphragm to control your breathing. To try it, follow the steps on the next page.



- Start off by making sure that you are comfortable.
- Make sure that your back is well supported and put one hand on your upper chest and the other on your tummy.
- Now close your eyes and focus on your breathing.
- Notice how quickly you are breathing and try to slow it down.
- Take a long, slow, relaxed breath in through your nose. Push out your tummy (this helps your lungs to fill up) and feel the air gliding slowly down in to your lungs.
- Hold it there for a few seconds, then slowly breathe out again through your mouth, with your lips slightly parted. Let your tummy fall - this helps get rid of the air from your lungs.
- Take another long, slow breath in, pushing your tummy out, then breathe out, letting your tummy fall.
- Think about your neck and

shoulders - is there any tension there? If there is, bring your shoulders up towards your ears, then slowly lower them back down, loosening any tension.

- Check for signs of tension in any other parts of your body.
- Focus on your breathing again, taking slow, relaxed breaths in through your nose and slow, relaxed breaths out through your mouth. Imagine the tension flowing away with every breath out.

Pacing

Pacing is a technique that you can use to gradually increase your level of activity.

How does it work?

If you have chronic pain, you might find that you have good days, when you can get on with things around the house or do something that you enjoy, and bad days, when you can do very little. As time goes on, some people find that they have fewer good days and more bad days.

Pacing is all about breaking this pattern and gradually increasing what you can do. It should be possible to pace any activity, although in everyday life we are not used to doing things gradually, we like to get things done quickly. But pacing really does work!

How do I do it?

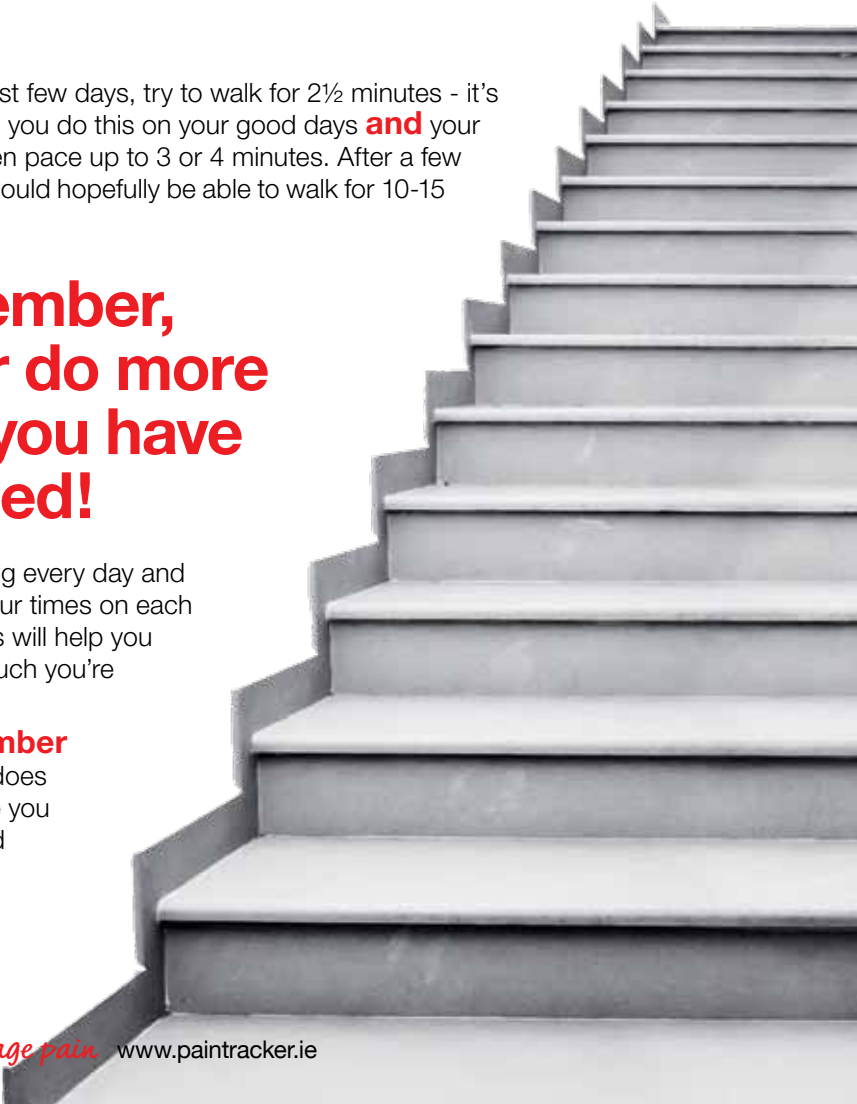
Start by choosing one or more activities that you want to be able to do, or be able to do for longer, e.g. walking, sitting, standing, etc. If it's the first time you've tried pacing, don't be too ambitious. Choose an activity that you find difficult, but not impossible.

Before you start, you need to work out your **baseline** time.

To do this:

- Make a note of how long you can **comfortably** do the activity for.
- Divide by **two**.

For example, if you choose walking as your activity, and you can comfortably walk for 5 minutes, your baseline time would be 2½ minutes.



So, on your first few days, try to walk for 2½ minutes - it's important that you do this on your good days **and** your bad days. Then pace up to 3 or 4 minutes. After a few weeks, you should hopefully be able to walk for 10-15 minutes.

Remember, Never do more than you have planned!

Practise pacing every day and write down your times on each occasion. This will help you to see how much you're improving.

And remember

pacing really does work because you stay motivated by continually achieving a series of small goals!

Goal setting

Chronic pain can affect lots of different aspects of your life. You may find that you have had to give up going places or doing things that you used to enjoy because you are afraid that this may make you feel worse. Also, it may be a little frightening to think about starting something new. Goal setting is rather like pacing, you can use it to gradually build up the activities that you do. It's all about putting you back in control of your pain, rather than letting the pain control you.

A goal is something that you would like to achieve. It may be going to the cinema, walking the dog, or playing with your children or grandchildren. There are many different kinds of goals and they can be either short or long-term.

There are four golden rules for setting goals:

- The goal must be realistic.
- It must be something you can measure.
- It should be your own goal - don't let someone else pick it for you.
- Don't be too ambitious to start with, pick something that's important to you, but not impossible. Look beyond your pain to what's important in your life.

How do I set goals?

The first step is to decide on your goal. Then think about all the things you need to do to achieve that goal. It might help to write all this down on a piece of paper. Say, for example, that your goal is to start driving your car again. There are lots of things involved in this:

- Getting in and out of the car.
- Sitting in the driver's seat.
- Turning your head to look in the mirror.
- Twisting to put on your seat belt.
- Moving the pedals up and down.
- Leaning forward over the steering wheel.
- Pulling the handbrake on.
- Changing gear.
- Opening and closing the door.
- Concentrating on the road.
- Looking to the side as you pull out of a junction.

Now look at each of these things in turn, what do you have problems with? If, for example, you have a problem with sitting, you should start by gradually increasing the amount of time that you sit in the driver's seat. Use the pacing technique described on Pages 7–8 to do this. To start with, you might only be able to sit for a minute or two, but after a few

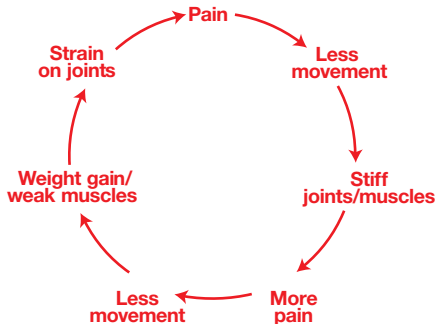
weeks, you should hopefully be able to build this up to 15 minutes or so. You may also want to make practical changes, such as back supports and wider mirrors.

It's important to review your progress regularly, about once a week if you can and re-think some of your methods if they're not working. Always remember that each small step is an achievement in itself, and that lots of small steps can help you take one big leap. Hopefully you'll be on your way back to a more active life.

**Remember,
Always take
time to
enjoy your
successes
too!**

Exercise

When we experience acute pain, it makes us rest so that healing can take place. For example, if you sprained your wrist, the pain would stop you using it so that it could heal. However, with chronic pain, you may feel pain even if there is no injury and no healing. This pain causes you to avoid certain movements and activities, making your muscles and joints stiff. This, in turn, makes the pain worse - this is called the pain cycle:



If you have chronic pain, you may be afraid to do exercise. However, staying active, within realistic limits, can be very beneficial. It can:

- have a conditioning effect on your muscles and joints.
- improve your mobility.
- help your circulation.
- improve your general sense of well-being and staying power.
- improve your posture.
- help reduce the pain.

Remember unused muscles feel more pain than toned flexible ones. Speak to your doctor or nurse about a modest exercise programme that you can do safely. As you build up your strength, you will be able to do more exercise.

Coping with flare-ups

From time to time, you may find that you experience periods of increased pain, sometimes called flare-ups.

Although these flare-ups don't usually last very long, they often come on quickly and without much warning, so they can be difficult to cope with. It may be tempting to go back to your old habits, like taking more medication or going to bed. Try not to do this.

- Recognise what is happening.
- Don't panic.
- Take your medications regularly.
- Continue with the relaxation and breathing exercises described on Pages 2-6.
- If you are unable to continue with your exercises for a couple of days, start slowly and re-set your goals if you need to.

- Try to think positively, negative thoughts can make things worse.
- Be kind to yourself!
- If the flare-up carries on for more than a few days, contact your nurse or GP.

You might also find that preparing in advance for any flare-ups can really reduce your distress.

A guide to sleeping

Those with chronic pain often find that they have problems sleeping. You might find it difficult to get off to sleep, or find that you waken during the night because of your pain. Unfortunately, the more you try to sleep, the harder it sometimes becomes. This can increase your stress levels, which can make the pain worse, which, in turn, makes it more difficult to sleep. So, it's like a vicious circle.

If this sounds familiar, try following the advice below:

- Try not to nap during the day, no matter how tired you feel, do something else instead.
- Avoid tea, coffee, alcohol and cigarettes for 4 hours before you go to bed.
- Wait until you feel tired before you go to bed.
- Be aware of the messages you give yourself about bedtime, don't go to bed expecting not to sleep!
- Try to go to bed at the same time each night.
- Do not read, eat or watch TV in bed.
- Make sure that your bed is comfortable, use pillows to support your legs and back.
- Use the relaxation and breathing exercises in bed (see Pages 2-6).
- If you can't get off to sleep, get up and do something, such as reading or relaxation exercises.
- Get up at the same time every morning, regardless of how much you slept during the night. Set your alarm clock if you need to.

As we discussed on Page 2, stress and tension can make your pain worse, so it's important that you learn how to cope with (or even avoid) stress. This involves knowing what it is and recognising when you are suffering from it.

What is stress?

In our day-to-day lives, each of us faces physical and emotional demands from our friends, family, work and so on. Most of the time, we can cope with these demands and there's no problem. However, stress occurs when we are unable to cope. As well as increasing the pain, this can make you quick-tempered, weepy, angry and frustrated. Chronic pain itself also causes stress.

How can I cope with it?

There are a number of ways of coping with stress. Some of these are listed below.

- Being able to relax. There are some relaxation exercises on Pages 2-4 that might help you with this.
- Having someone to confide in.
- Being able to find a practical solution to the problem, rather than worrying about it.
- Using the pacing techniques and breathing exercises described on Pages 5-8.

Assertiveness and communication

People with chronic pain sometimes lose their confidence, finding it hard to express their needs. If you don't express your needs clearly, this can increase your tension, which as you know, can increase your pain. So it's important to communicate well and to be assertive. You can do this by following the simple tips given below.

- Be firm and say what you mean.
 - Try not to complain, plead or be apologetic.
 - Don't shout or raise your voice, keep it calm and low.
 - Make sure your message is clear, rather than expecting people to guess what you're getting at.
 - Don't tell people what to do, but explain to them why you're asking them to do something.
- Ask for help when you need it.
 - When you're asking for something, say 'I want' instead of 'I need' and 'I don't want' instead of 'I cannot'.
 - Be precise and to the point - don't beat about the bush!

Taking your medication

Most patients with chronic pain will be taking some kind of medication. There are various different types of painkillers; the type that your doctor prescribes for you will be based on how bad your pain is.

Most painkillers are taken by mouth.

Tablets
Capsules
Liquids

However, some patients have difficulty swallowing or prefer to take their medications in other ways. These include:

Suppositories
Injections
Creams
Patches

Some women may already be familiar

with patches, as these have been used for many years for hormone replacement therapy (HRT). More recently, patches have also been introduced as a way of delivering painkillers. They're basically like a big plaster, which you stick on to the skin. The patch contains the painkiller, which is absorbed across the skin and into the bloodstream.

If you are taking medication for your pain, try to follow these tips:

- Ask your doctor to explain what the medication is, what it's for and how to take it.
- Read the instructions on the pack or in the leaflet before you start taking your medication.
- **Always** take your medication when you are supposed to.

- For example, if you have been told to take it three times a day, take it three times a day; don't wait until the pain gets really bad.
- If you are taking tablets, always take them with water, not hot or fizzy drinks. Swallow the tablets whole and never crush or chew them, unless your doctor tells you otherwise.
- Make sure that you eat regularly - this means that there is less chance of you feeling sick.
- If you get side effects and they are bothering you, speak to your chemist, nurse or doctor.
- **Always** keep your medication in a safe place.

**Remember,
As well as
taking your
medication,
try to use
the other
methods
discussed in
this booklet!**



Personal details

Name:

Address:

Tel Home:
Work:
Mobile:

Email:

Next of kin

Name:

Address:

Tel Home:

Work:
Mobile:

Email:

GP

Name:

Address:

Tel:

Pharmacy

Address:

Opening hours

Tel:

Diagnosis details

Complete this page to record details of your original diagnosis. The G.P. looking after you will help you with any areas you are unsure about.

Original Diagnosis:

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Name of Hospital & Consultant:

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Year you were first diagnosed:

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Treatment plan:

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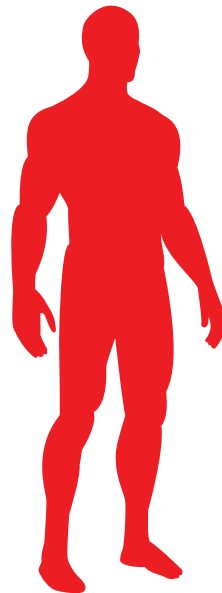
Other recommendation
(exercise/diet etc.):

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Next G.P. visit:

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Please circle regular sites of pain:



G.P. visits

Date Seen:

Symptoms:

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Advice Given:

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Next Visit:

Date Seen:

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