

## Contact details

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[www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/physiotherapy/physiotherapy-appointment-service/](http://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/physiotherapy/physiotherapy-appointment-service/)

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For further assistance or to receive this information in a different format, please contact the department which created this leaflet.

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## PATIENT INFORMATION

# The Spine

## Degenerative Change



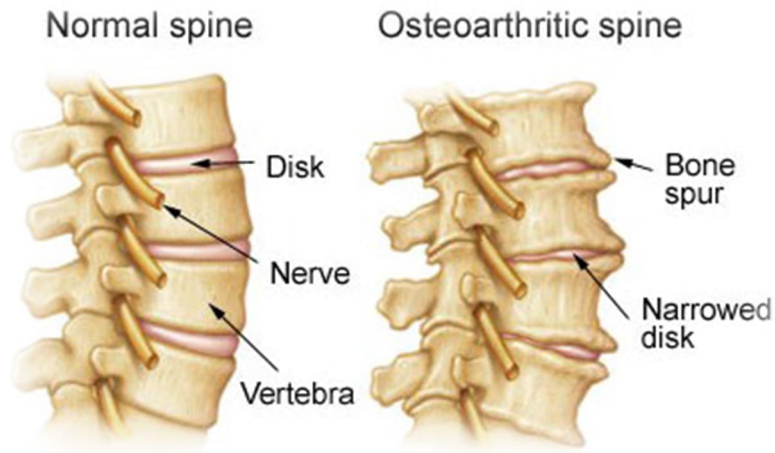
*Working with you, for you*

## What is degenerative change?

Degenerative change in the spine is a part of normal wear which is associated with ageing and general use. It can cause a degree of alteration to the normal structure and/or function. It is not typically due to a specific injury or trauma.

The normal spine has many bones (vertebrae) and a collection of nerves which branch out in pairs at each level. In between each vertebra there is a disc which acts as a shock absorber and spacer. The discs are made from a soft material which gives the spine flexibility and durability.

The vertebrae, discs, ligaments and/or joints can be affected. In some people these changes can also cause irritation to other structures, such as the nerves which exit the spine nearby.



It is **entirely normal** to have these changes and **not experience any symptoms**.

## Useful Websites

### Trust Resources

#### Healthy Lifestyles Team

<https://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/healthy-lifestyles/>

#### Pain Services

<https://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/pain-service/reconnect2life/>

#### Physiotherapy Booking Service

[www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/physiotherapy/](http://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/physiotherapy/)

### External Resources

**NICE Guidelines** for assessment and management of low back pain and sciatica in over 16s

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng59>

#### One Small Step

<https://www.onesmallstep.org.uk/>

#### NHS Back Pain Advice

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/back-pain/>

#### Chartered Society of Physiotherapy Website

[www.csp.org.uk/conditions/back-pain](http://www.csp.org.uk/conditions/back-pain)

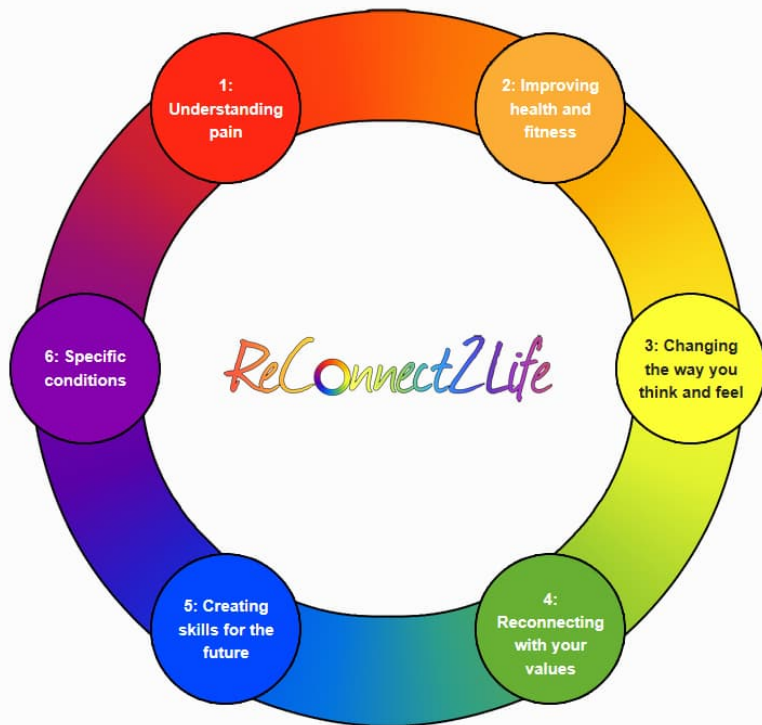
## Pain Services

If you have pain that lasts for longer than 3 months you may be referred on to our Pain Physiotherapy Service. This Team offers a series of educational pain seminars and short courses. They can also offer a one-to-one appointment if it would suit you better.

The Pain Management Service are a multi-disciplinary team who help in the management of painful conditions. They include, but are not limited to; Consultant Anaesthetists, Psychologists, Physiotherapists, Nurse Specialists and Exercise Coordinators.

You can access information about the Pain Services at:

<https://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/pain-service/reconnect2life/>



## What can I expect?

Some people may report symptoms of:

- Stiffness
- Pain/Aching
- Reduced range of movement
- Postural discomfort
- Secondary muscular tightness
- Occasionally altered sensation in limbs

Non-specific or mechanical pain is often used to describe degenerative spinal pain. It is often difficult to find a precise cause for pain. Less than 1 in 100 people have a serious problem. It can be caused by an injury but most of the time it can come on for no particular reason. It can be described as 'non-specific', 'simple' or mechanical pain. This means that following examination, the clinician is not concerned that you have a serious medical condition. This is the type of pain that is likely to improve over the next few weeks as you gradually return to normal activities and work.

You are likely to experience 'flare-ups'. This means your symptoms can be present for a certain amount of time (typically 3-4 months) before easing off.

### **When to seek medical help:**

- Severe pain that doesn't improve.
- If you have had a fall that caused your back pain to start.
- If you have had cancer in the past.
- If you are taking steroid tablets or have osteoporosis.
- If you have a fever or are generally unwell.
- If you have difficulty or changes in passing urine or opening your bowels.
- Numbness around your genitals or back passage.
- Weakness of the limb(s) that is getting worse.

## How do I manage an acute flare up?

Symptoms will normally get better within a few weeks but there are a few things you can do to help:

### **Painkillers**

- Take some simple pain killers or anti-inflammatories such as ibuprofen (ensure that you check with a pharmacist first that this is okay).
- Contact your Pharmacist or GP to ask about other pain killing medication if these don't suit you.
- Try hot or cold packs for symptom relief.

### **Sleep**

- Taking pain relief just before bed may make it easier to get to sleep.
- Lying on your side with a pillow between your knees can help to support your spine.

### **Activity**

- If pain is really bad you may need a short period of rest but bed rest should be avoided if possible. It should only be necessary if the pain is so bad that you can't move around at all (maximum of 24-48 hours).
- Choose a comfortable position to rest in between activity.
- Try to move around for a few minutes every hour to prevent stiffness.
- Activity has been shown to be the most effective way of improving pain.

### **Work**

- Resume your normal activity and get back to work. A little pain and some restriction are normal.
- If you have a difficult or heavy job it may be possible to make some simple changes to make it easier. Speak to your employer.

***Remember – pain does not necessarily mean harm.***

### **Physiotherapy**

- Physiotherapy can help you to improve joint mobility and function through exercises and advice

### **Exercise and Activity**

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommends staying physically active for back pain.

Your physiotherapist will be able to provide you with some specific exercises that will help your recovery. Regular exercises may also help to prevent the pain from returning.

Increasing activity and exercise can be achieved in a variety of ways. Anything you enjoy from walking the dog, or cycling to work, to swimming, Pilates, Tai Chi or dancing. You can undertake activity at home (e.g. video/online led exercise programme) or in community led classes provided by the NHS, local leisure centre or privately.

Local Public Health Services you may wish to contact include:

### **Healthy Lifestyles Team**

<https://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/services/healthy-lifestyles/>

### **One Small Step**

<https://www.onesmallstep.org.uk/>