

Why resting in bed will not help recovery?

The well-intentioned advice to rest in bed following the onset of acute low back pain had been demonstrated to be unhelpful to recovery in as early as 1986. Since then, there has been a growing body of high-quality trials and systematic reviews to support the importance of staying active and returning to usual activities, including work and hobbies, to aid in low back pain recovery.

For example, a 1996 Finnish study found that persons who continued their activities without bed rest following onset of low back pain appeared to have better back flexibility than those who rested in bed for a week. Other studies suggest that bed rest alone may make back pain worse and can lead to secondary complications such as depression, decreased muscle tone, and blood clots in the legs.

It is, however, still essential to avoid any activities or movements that aggravate the low back pain in the first 2 – 3 days after the initial injury. This is because there is likely to be inflammation (swelling) present in the strained joint or tissues in the low back, much like the swelling of the ankle joint after a sprain.

Appropriate 'first aid' management includes ice pack treatment, short-doses of anti-inflammatory medication (e.g. ibuprofen), and intermittent resting breaks of no longer than 30 mins in the day time. At night, patients may side-lie with a pillow between the knees, or under the knees if lying on the back.



Prolonged bed rest has been shown to be unhelpful, and is associated with higher levels of pain, greater disability, poorer recovery and greater absence from work. In fact, it appears that the longer you stay in bed because of back pain, the worse your pain becomes. Continuing with work and daily activities may initially cause pain and discomfort, but if this is managed well and paced gradually, the recovery process is actually quicker than with prolonged resting.

A consultation and proper assessment with a qualified health-care professional, such as an osteopath, will ensure that you receive an accurate diagnosis and manual treatment to lessen the pain and discomfort. Individually-tailored advice will also be given to help you manage the back pain, in order to ensure the quickest possible recovery.