

# Managing low back pain and sciatica

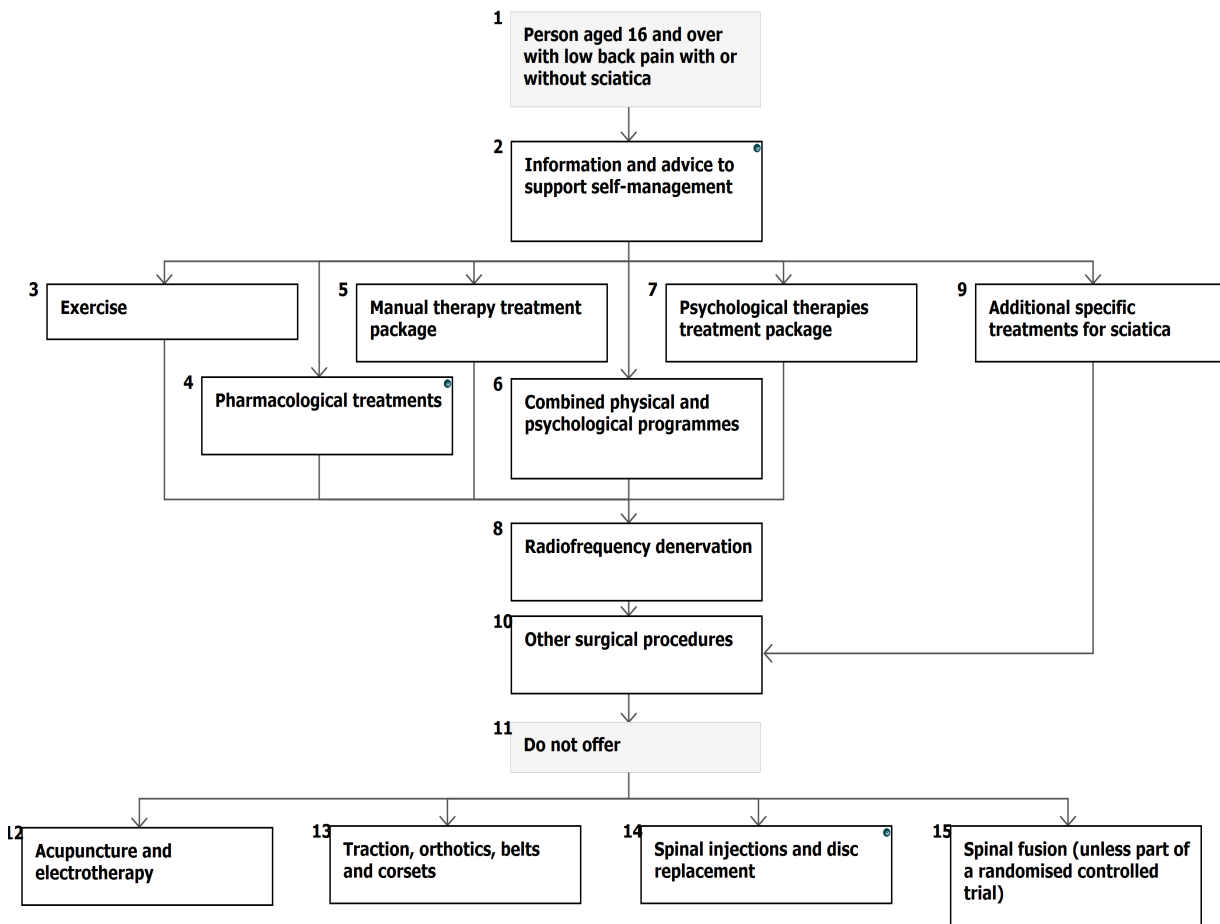
NICE Pathways bring together everything NICE says on a topic in an interactive flowchart. NICE Pathways are interactive and designed to be used online.

They are updated regularly as new NICE guidance is published. To view the latest version of this NICE Pathway see:

<http://pathways.nice.org.uk/pathways/low-back-pain-and-sciatica>

NICE Pathway last updated: October 2018

This document contains a single flowchart and uses numbering to link the boxes to the associated recommendations.



## 1 Person aged 16 and over with low back pain with or without sciatica

No additional information

## 2 Information and advice to support self-management

Provide people with advice and information, tailored to their needs and capabilities, to help them self-manage their low back pain with or without sciatica, at all steps of the treatment pathway.

Include:

- information on the nature of low back pain and sciatica
- encouragement to continue with normal activities.

NICE has written information for the public on [low back pain and sciatica in over 16s: assessment and management](#).

Promote and facilitate return to work or normal activities of daily living for people with low back pain with or without sciatica.

See what NICE says on [managing long-term sickness and incapacity for work](#).

### Quality standards

The following quality statement is relevant to this part of the interactive flowchart.

#### 3. Self-management

## 3 Exercise

Consider a group exercise programme (biomechanical, aerobic, mind–body or a combination of approaches) within the NHS for people with a specific episode or flare-up of low back pain with or without sciatica. Take people's specific needs, preferences and capabilities into account when choosing the type of exercise.

## 4 Pharmacological treatments

Offer oral NSAIDs for managing low back pain, taking into account potential differences in

gastrointestinal, liver and cardio-renal toxicity, and the person's risk factors, including age.

When prescribing oral NSAIDs for low back pain, think about appropriate clinical assessment, ongoing monitoring of risk factors, and the use of gastroprotective treatment.

Prescribe oral NSAIDs for low back pain at the lowest effective dose for the shortest possible period of time.

Consider weak opioids (with or without paracetamol) for managing acute low back pain only if an NSAID is contraindicated, not tolerated or has been ineffective.

Do not offer paracetamol alone for managing low back pain.

Do not routinely offer opioids for managing acute low back pain.

Do not offer opioids for managing chronic low back pain.

Do not offer selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, serotonin–norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors or tricyclic antidepressants for managing low back pain.

Do not offer anticonvulsants for managing low back pain.

See what NICE says on [medicines optimisation](#).

## Quality standards

The following quality statements are relevant to this part of the interactive flowchart.

4. Anticonvulsants, antidepressants and paracetamol for low back pain without sciatica
5. Opioids for chronic low back pain without sciatica

## 5 Manual therapy treatment package

Consider manual therapy (manipulation, mobilisation or soft tissue techniques (for example, massage)) for managing low back pain with or without sciatica, but only as part of a treatment package including exercise, with or without psychological therapy.

## 6 Combined physical and psychological programmes

Consider a combined physical and psychological programme, incorporating a cognitive behavioural approach (preferably in a group context that takes into account a person's specific needs and capabilities), for people with persistent low back pain or sciatica:

- when they have significant psychosocial obstacles to recovery (for example, avoiding normal activities based on inappropriate beliefs about their condition) **or**
- when previous treatments have not been effective.

## 7 Psychological therapies treatment package

Consider psychological therapies using a cognitive behavioural approach for managing low back pain with or without sciatica but only as part of a treatment package including exercise, with or without manual therapy (spinal manipulation, mobilisation or soft tissue techniques such as massage).

## 8 Radiofrequency denervation

Consider referral for assessment for radiofrequency denervation for people with chronic low back pain when:

- non-surgical treatment has not worked for them **and**
- the main source of pain is thought to come from structures supplied by the medial branch nerve **and**
- they have moderate or severe levels of localised back pain (rated as 5 or more on a visual analogue scale, or equivalent) at the time of referral.

Only perform radiofrequency denervation in people with chronic low back pain after a positive response to a diagnostic medial branch block.

Do not offer imaging for people with low back pain with specific facet joint pain as a prerequisite for radiofrequency denervation.

NICE has published a medtech innovation briefing on [SimpliCT laser-guided needle placement in interventional radiology](#).

## 9 Additional specific treatments for sciatica

### Neuropathic pain

For information on pharmacological management of sciatica, see NICE recommendations on [neuropathic pain](#).

### Epidurals

Consider epidural injections of local anaesthetic and steroid in people with acute and severe sciatica.

Do not use epidural injections for neurogenic claudication in people who have central spinal canal stenosis.

### Spinal decompression surgery

Consider spinal decompression for people with sciatica when non-surgical treatment has not improved pain or function and their radiological findings are consistent with sciatic symptoms.

### Referral for surgical opinion

Do not allow a person's BMI, smoking status or psychological distress to influence the decision to refer them for a surgical opinion for sciatica.

## 10 Other surgical procedures

### Spinal cord stimulation for chronic pain of neuropathic or ischaemic origin

The following recommendations are from NICE technology appraisal guidance on [spinal cord stimulation for chronic pain of neuropathic or ischaemic origin](#).

Spinal cord stimulation is recommended as a treatment option for adults with chronic pain of neuropathic origin who:

- continue to experience chronic pain (measuring at least 50 mm on a 0–100 mm visual analogue scale) for at least 6 months despite appropriate conventional medical management, and
- who have had a successful trial of stimulation as part of the assessment specified below.

Spinal cord stimulation is not recommended as a treatment option for adults with chronic pain of ischaemic origin except in the context of research as part of a clinical trial. Such research should be designed to generate robust evidence about the benefits of spinal cord stimulation (including pain relief, functional outcomes and quality of life) compared with standard care.

Spinal cord stimulation should be provided only after an assessment by a multidisciplinary team experienced in chronic pain assessment and management of people with spinal cord stimulation devices, including experience in the provision of ongoing monitoring and support of the person assessed.

When assessing the severity of pain and the trial of stimulation, the multidisciplinary team should be aware of the need to ensure equality of access to treatment with spinal cord stimulation. Tests to assess pain and response to spinal cord stimulation should take into account a person's disabilities (such as physical or sensory disabilities), or linguistic or other communication difficulties, and may need to be adapted.

If different spinal cord stimulation systems are considered to be equally suitable for a person, the least costly should be used. Assessment of cost should take into account acquisition costs, the anticipated longevity of the system, the stimulation requirements of the person with chronic pain and the support package offered.

People who are currently using spinal cord stimulation for the treatment of chronic pain of ischaemic origin should have the option to continue treatment until they and their clinicians consider it appropriate to stop.

NICE has written information for the public on [spinal cord stimulation for chronic pain of neuropathic or ischaemic origin](#).

### **iFuse for treating chronic sacroiliac joint pain**

The following recommendations are from NICE medical technologies guidance on [iFuse for treating chronic sacroiliac joint pain](#).

The case for adopting the iFuse implant system to treat chronic sacroiliac joint pain is supported by the evidence. Using iFuse leads to improved pain relief, better quality of life and less disability compared with non-surgical management.

iFuse should be considered for use in people with a confirmed diagnosis of chronic sacroiliac joint pain (based on clinical assessment and a positive response to a diagnostic injection of local anaesthetic in the sacroiliac joint) and whose pain is inadequately controlled by non-

surgical management.

Cost modelling indicates that after 8 years, using iFuse instead of non-surgical management will save the NHS around £129 per patient. It is likely that savings will then increase over time. Savings mainly come from fewer steroid joint injections and less pain relief medication with iFuse compared with non-surgical management.

### Interventional procedures guidance

NICE has published guidance on the following with **standard or normal arrangements** for clinical governance, consent and audit:

- [minimally invasive sacroiliac joint fusion surgery for chronic sacroiliac pain](#)
- [percutaneous coblation of the intervertebral disc for low back pain and sciatica](#)
- [non-rigid stabilisation techniques for the treatment of low back pain](#)
- [interspinous distraction procedures for lumbar spinal stenosis causing neurogenic claudication](#)
- [percutaneous intradiscal laser ablation in the lumbar spine](#).

NICE has published guidance on the following with **special arrangements** for clinical governance, consent and audit or research:

- [percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency treatment of the intervertebral disc nucleus for low back pain](#)
- [percutaneous electrothermal treatment of the intervertebral disc annulus for low back pain and sciatica](#)
- [insertion of an annular disc implant at lumbar discectomy](#)
- [peripheral nerve-field stimulation for chronic low back pain](#)
- [automated percutaneous mechanical lumbar discectomy](#).

NICE has published guidance that [epiduroscopic lumbar discectomy through the sacral hiatus for sciatica](#) should only be used **in the context of research**.

## 11 Do not offer

No additional information



## 12 Acupuncture and electrotherapy

### Acupuncture

Do not offer acupuncture for managing low back pain with or without sciatica.

### Electrotherapy

Do not offer ultrasound for managing low back pain with or without sciatica.

Do not offer PENS for managing low back pain with or without sciatica.

Do not offer TENS for managing low back pain with or without sciatica.

Do not offer interferential therapy for managing low back pain with or without sciatica.

## 13 Traction, orthotics, belts and corsets

Do not offer traction for managing low back pain with or without sciatica.

Do not offer belts or corsets for managing low back pain with or without sciatica.

Do not offer foot orthotics for managing low back pain with or without sciatica.

Do not offer rocker sole shoes for managing low back pain with or without sciatica.

## 14 Spinal injections and disc replacement

### Spinal injections

Do not offer spinal injections for managing low back pain.

### Disc replacement

Do not offer disc replacement in people with low back pain.

NICE has published interventional procedures guidance on prosthetic intervertebral disc replacement in the lumbar spine with **normal arrangements** for clinical governance, consent

and audit.

## Quality standards

The following quality statement is relevant to this part of the interactive flowchart.

### 6. Spinal injections

## 15 Spinal fusion

Do not offer spinal fusion for people with low back pain unless as part of a randomised controlled trial.

### Interbody fusion

NICE has published interventional procedures guidance on the following procedures with **standard arrangements** for clinical governance, consent and audit:

- [transaxial interbody lumbosacral fusion](#)
- [lateral interbody fusion in the lumbar spine for low back pain](#).

Although these interventional procedures found spinal fusion to be safe and efficacious, follow the NICE guideline recommendation above and do not offer spinal fusion unless as part of a randomised controlled trial.

## Glossary

### NSAIDs

non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs

### PENs

percutaneous electrical nerve stimulation

### TENs

transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation

### non-specific low back pain

pain in the back between the bottom of the rib cage and the buttock creases. A diagnosis of non-specific low back pain simply means that the back pain is very unlikely to be because of a serious problem such as cancer, infection, fracture, or as part of more widespread inflammation

## Sources

[Low back pain and sciatica in over 16s: assessment and management](#) (2016) NICE guideline NG59

[Spinal cord stimulation for chronic pain of neuropathic or ischaemic origin](#) (2008) NICE technology appraisal guidance 159

[iFuse for treating chronic sacroiliac joint pain](#) (2018) NICE medical technologies guidance 39

## Your responsibility

### Guidelines

The recommendations in this guideline represent the view of NICE, arrived at after careful consideration of the evidence available. When exercising their judgement, professionals and practitioners are expected to take this guideline fully into account, alongside the individual

needs, preferences and values of their patients or the people using their service. It is not mandatory to apply the recommendations, and the guideline does not override the responsibility to make decisions appropriate to the circumstances of the individual, in consultation with them and their families and carers or guardian.

Local commissioners and providers of healthcare have a responsibility to enable the guideline to be applied when individual professionals and people using services wish to use it. They should do so in the context of local and national priorities for funding and developing services, and in light of their duties to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, to advance equality of opportunity and to reduce health inequalities. Nothing in this guideline should be interpreted in a way that would be inconsistent with complying with those duties.

Commissioners and providers have a responsibility to promote an environmentally sustainable health and care system and should assess and reduce the environmental impact of implementing NICE recommendations wherever possible.

## Technology appraisals

The recommendations in this interactive flowchart represent the view of NICE, arrived at after careful consideration of the evidence available. When exercising their judgement, health professionals are expected to take these recommendations fully into account, alongside the individual needs, preferences and values of their patients. The application of the recommendations in this interactive flowchart is at the discretion of health professionals and their individual patients and do not override the responsibility of healthcare professionals to make decisions appropriate to the circumstances of the individual patient, in consultation with the patient and/or their carer or guardian.

Commissioners and/or providers have a responsibility to provide the funding required to enable the recommendations to be applied when individual health professionals and their patients wish to use it, in accordance with the NHS Constitution. They should do so in light of their duties to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, to advance equality of opportunity and to reduce health inequalities.

Commissioners and providers have a responsibility to promote an environmentally sustainable health and care system and should assess and reduce the environmental impact of implementing NICE recommendations wherever possible.

**Medical technologies guidance, diagnostics guidance and interventional procedures guidance**

The recommendations in this interactive flowchart represent the view of NICE, arrived at after careful consideration of the evidence available. When exercising their judgement, healthcare professionals are expected to take these recommendations fully into account. However, the interactive flowchart does not override the individual responsibility of healthcare professionals to make decisions appropriate to the circumstances of the individual patient, in consultation with the patient and/or guardian or carer.

Commissioners and/or providers have a responsibility to implement the recommendations, in their local context, in light of their duties to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations. Nothing in this interactive flowchart should be interpreted in a way that would be inconsistent with compliance with those duties.

Commissioners and providers have a responsibility to promote an environmentally sustainable health and care system and should assess and reduce the environmental impact of implementing NICE recommendations wherever possible.