

Chronic back pain

Move regularly to help protect your spine

People with chronic back pain should seek expert medical advice to identify the cause and receive treatment.

It's an unfortunate fact that chronic back pain is extremely common. It can be caused by many things.

Most of us are vulnerable to neck and back pain caused by poor posture – especially those who sit at desks in front of screens all day.

It helps to be “back aware” when you spend long hours in a seat. Get up and move around every couple of hours. Make sure the desk and screen are adjusted so that the top of the screen is slightly below eye level.

To help avoid the neck and back pain caused by poor posture, it is recommended that we do back-strengthening and stretching exercises at least two or three times a week.

Lifting excessive loads is another common cause of back pain.

Listen to expert advice. If you need to lift an object, ensure you keep your back straight and vertical, and bend your hips and knees. This decreases the stress on the back.

If an object is excessively heavy, get a trolley – or at least some helping hands. Too many people learn this lesson too late.

Some forms of chronic back pain can be dealt with quite well with supportive, interventional physiotherapy. Forms of back pain that most lend themselves to this style of treatment are those involving soft tissues – such as muscles. These include back-



Get the right help: Dr Michael Wong says neurosurgeons are “trained not just to manage conditions of the bony structures of the spine but the nerves as well”. Photo: Eddie Jim

muscle spasm and back-muscle strain, caused by muscle fatigue.

Aside from ergonomic causes of back pain, and those that can be managed with physiotherapy, other major causes of back pain are the degenerative spine diseases.

“These can be caused by a disc prolapse, joint arthritis and disc degeneration – which may cause nerve compression,” says Dr

Michael Wong, neurosurgeon and spine expert at EPC Health in Melbourne.

Other, more uncommon causes for chronic back pain are fractures, tumours, and infection.

Fortunately these are rare.

“The most important thing about treating chronic back pain is to identify the reason and the cause,” Wong says. “While surgery

as a treatment has improved dramatically over the past 20 years, you still don't want to have unnecessary surgery.

“To be sure of the reason for the pain, proper imaging is imperative.” The “gold standard” is an MRI scan, he says.

“Once imaging is obtained, the next step is to get a referral to the right specialist.

“Some patients will need to see a specialist neurosurgeon, since a neurosurgeon is trained not just to manage conditions of the bony structures of the spine but the nerves as well.”

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Just as important as getting accurate imaging is being able to interpret it, and this is where seeing the right neurosurgeon is crucial.

“For most back problems the answer is not surgery but more conservative treatment that includes physiotherapy and pain management by a specialist physician,” he says.

“However, going straight to physiotherapy without getting a proper diagnosis first is not advised.”

Yes, back pain remains common and debilitating. But there's good news too: with proper treatment, most chronic back pain can be either vastly improved or eradicated.