15 things you didn’t know about BACK PAIN
Back pain is so prevalent that it costs the country more than cancer and diabetes treated combined, but there are many myths circulating about the common ailment.

We asked some of Ireland’s leading experts to shed some light on the common ailment.

1. An оming back pain costs the State more than cancer and diabetes combined. Most of these costs are related to treating people with long-term pain. Scientific research in the area of back pain has progressed in recent times and it is challenging widespread beliefs held about the condition that seems to plague so many people.

2. Both healthcare professionals and the very small number of the public often consider getting a scan “just in case” there is something serious going on in their pain. However, all the evidence suggests scans only show something truly important in a tiny minority (<5pc) of people with back pain.

3. A brief consultation with a healthcare professional (e.g. chartered physiotherapist) would usually be able to identify a scan was really needed based on a person’s symptoms and medical history.

4. When someone has scans for back pain, the scans often show up things that are poorly linked with pain. In fact, studies have shown that even people who don’t have back pain have things like bulging discs, herniated discs (20%) and “arthritis” changes visible (20%). Remember, these people do NOT have pain! Unfortunately, people with back pain are often advised that these things indicate their back is damaged, and this can lead to further fear, distress and avoidance of activity. The fact is that many of these things reported on scans are more like balckness — an indication of ageing and genetics that do not have to be painful.

5. If you have back pain, the degree of pain felt can vary according to a number of factors, including the situation in which the pain occurs, previous pain experience, your mood, fears, fitness, stress levels and coping style. For example, an athlete or soldier may not experience much pain after a injury until later when they are in a less intense environment.

6. Furthermore, our nervous system has the ability to regulate how much pain a person feels at any given time. If a person has back pain it might be that their nervous system has become hyper-sensible and is causing the person to experience pain, even though the initial strain or spasm has healed.

7. This can mean the person feels more pain when they move or try to do something, even though they are not damaging their spine. Once people with back pain can distinguish between the “hurt” they are feeling from any concerns about “harm” being done to their back, it is easier to participate in treatment.

8. Most people with back pain can manage it by staying active, developing a better understanding about what pain means, and identifying the factors which are involved in their pain. This should help them continue their usual daily tasks, without having to resort to surgery. On average, the results for spinal surgery are not better in the medium and long-term than non-surgical interventions, such as exercise.

9. School bags are safe. A brief consultation with a healthcare professional (e.g. chartered physiotherapist) would usually be able to identify if a scan was really needed based on a person’s symptoms and medical history.

10. People with back pain often believe that activities such as lifting, bending and twisting are dangerous and should be avoided. However, contrary to common belief, the research to date has not supported a consistent association between any of these factors and back pain. Of course, a person can strain their back if they lift something awkwardly or lifting something that is heavier than they should usually lift. Similarly, if a person has back pain, these activities might be more sore than usual. The problem, however, does not mean that the activity is dangerous or should be avoided.

11. While a lifting or bending incident could initially give a person back pain, bending and lifting is normal and should be practised to help strengthen the back, similar to returning to running after spraining an ankle.

12. When someone has scans for back pain, the scans often show up things that are poorly linked with pain. In fact, studies have shown that even people who don’t have back pain have things like bulging discs, herniated discs (20%) and “arthritis” changes visible (20%). Remember, these people do NOT have pain! Unfortunately, people with back pain are often advised that these things indicate their back is damaged, and this can lead to further fear, distress and avoidance of activity. The fact is that many of these things reported on scans are more like balckness — an indication of ageing and genetics that do not have to be painful.

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