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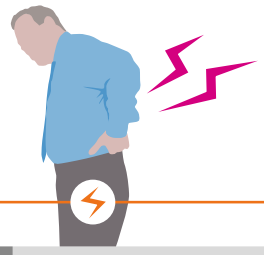
Visual summary

Managing low back pain and sciatica

A brief overview the new NICE guidelines, from the perspective of a patient presenting in primary care.



Person with low back pain

With or without sciatica

Consider alternatives

Exclude specific causes of low back pain, for example:

Cancer | Infection | Trauma | Inflammatory disease | Cauda equina

Referral

✗ Imaging

Only consider imaging:

In specialist care

and

If likely to alter management

Assess likely recovery outcomes

The complexity and intensity of treatment may vary depending on how likely it is that the patient will have a good functional outcome

Consider using risk stratification –such as the **STarT Back** risk assessment tool

Possible indicators of poor outcomes

Fear / pain avoidance ▶ | Low mood ▶ | Job dissatisfaction ▶ | Ongoing litigation ▶

◀ Good — Likely outcomes — Poor ▶

Provide self management information

Information on nature of pain | Encouragement to continue activities

Self management is important for all patients, even those with acute symptoms and/or sciatica

Managing sciatica

Epidural injections
for acute and severe sciatica

Steroid + **Local anaesthetic**

Spinal decompression
if not improved with non-surgical treatment

After acute symptoms of sciatica are controlled, it may be appropriate to (re)enter an excercise programme to manage underlying low back pain

To manage a specific episode

Pain is persistent / treatment resistant

Group exercise + **Manual therapy** + **Psychological therapy**

Combined physical + psychological programme

Consider pain relief options

Low back pain

Paracetamol	NSAIDs*	Weak opioids
✗ Not effective alone	✓ Consider oral NSAIDs	✓ If NSAID ineffective / not tolerated / contraindicated

✗ **Gabapentinoids or antidepressants** Lack of benefit

Acute sciatica	Chronic sciatica
Gabapentinoids	**Gabapentinoids or opioids**
✗ Lack of evidence	✗ Lack of evidence, risk of harm Explain risks of continuing Discuss withdrawal problems

✗ **Do not offer acupuncture**

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* NSAIDs = non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs

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