

A quick guide to acute – subacute low back pain

One of the most common workplace injuries that medical practitioners will treat is low back pain. A cornerstone to effective recovery and return to work from a low back injury is the AIM process (**assessing** the injury, providing **information** about the injury and appropriately **managing** the condition). Resuming normal activities as quickly as possible (including returning to work) is crucial in the rehabilitation process.

Outlined below is a snapshot of the management approach and algorithm contained in WorkCoverSA's *Managing acute-subacute low back pain – clinical practice guide*, which can assist medical practitioners to treat low back pain. This guide is available on WorkCover's website www.workcover.com > health providers > reference library > publications and forms.

Assessment, Information and Management of low back pain

Assess	Inform	Manage and monitor
Allow sufficient time during a consultation to discuss and identify beliefs, expectations and fears that workers might have about their condition and its management.	Inform the worker that pain does not mean the injury is getting worse – explain the difference between hurt and harm.	Manage an early return to work by discussing suitable work duty options with the worker and the workplace.
Aim to identify and address factors early that may influence management. These include the occurrence of trauma and other red flags; psychosocial factors; and yellow flags.	Instruct the worker to gradually resume normal activity despite some pain. Bed rest should be discouraged.	Manage each worker using an approach that includes awareness of the individual worker's psychosocial issues, advice, education and exercise.
Avoid imaging (plain X-ray, MRI or CT) in the early management of workers with low back pain unless justified by a clinical suspicion of a serious underlying condition (a red flag).	Inform the worker that in the majority of cases the most accurate diagnosis is 'non-specific low back pain'.	Monitor and assess the progress of the worker using regular reviews and measures of symptoms and function.
Assess the workers ability to return to safe and suitable work.	Inform the worker that most low back pain regardless of diagnosis is treated in the same way.	Make it a priority to activate a structured workplace intervention (eg, graded activity, worksite assessment, contact with the employer) for workers who have not returned to work after four weeks.
		Make a referral to a vocational rehabilitation provider via the worker's case manager if recovery is not as expected.

Management algorithm

