



SPINEmathema

SPINE CONVERSATIONS • 1

What really happens at physiotherapy?

A conversation about back and neck pain



Mr Ahmed-Ramadan Sadek
Neurosurgeon

with Sam
a fictional physiotherapist

Voices created with AI from a reviewed script. Sam is a fictional character.



What does a physiotherapist do?

Exercise

To improve movement and strength.
This is the heart of treatment.

Hands-on therapy

Massage and moving the area. Used
alongside exercise, not instead of it.

Advice

How to manage your symptoms and
stay active.

Most of the treatment that makes a difference is what you do between appointments.



Your first appointment

- **Questions about your symptoms, general health and daily life: work, sleep, what you find hard.**
- **An examination: how you move, your strength and your balance.**
- **Screening questions to pick up rare but serious causes of back pain.**
- **You usually leave with a short list of exercises, a plan for staying active, and an idea of how many sessions you might need.**



What NICE recommends

Advice

Tailored advice and information to manage your own pain, and keep up normal activities.

Exercise

Consider a group exercise programme: biomechanical, aerobic, mind-body or a mix.

Hands-on therapy

Only as part of a package that includes exercise. Never on its own.

Matched support

A risk tool such as STarT Back helps match how much support you get. The aim is getting back to work and daily life.



What NICE advises against for low back pain

- | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
|  Traction |  Acupuncture |  Belts or corsets |  Foot orthotics |
|  Rocker sole shoes |  Ultrasound |  TENS and PENS |  Interferential therapy |

If a clinic builds a whole course of treatment around these, it is fair to ask why.



Does it work? Long-standing low back pain

249

trials in the largest Cochrane review of exercise

≈15 / 100

points less pain than no treatment, usual care or placebo

Smaller

improvement in day-to-day function

Exercise has the strongest evidence of any physical treatment for long-standing low back pain. The benefit is usually moderate, not dramatic. Side effects were mostly minor, like muscle soreness.



What about the neck?

- The research is thinner: a Cochrane review of 27 trials found no high-quality evidence.
- Strengthening and endurance exercises for the neck, shoulders and upper back can reduce pain in long-standing neck pain. Stretching on its own did not seem to help.
- Hands-on therapy combined with exercise may reduce pain compared with no treatment, but the evidence is low certainty.

Physiotherapy rarely makes pain vanish. It helps you move more, worry less and get back to what you need to do.



How to get physiotherapy

On the NHS

In many parts of England you can refer yourself to a community MSK service without seeing your GP first. Some GP practices have a first contact physiotherapist. Waiting times vary.

Privately

Check your physiotherapist is registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). Chartered status shows as MCSP. Ask how many sessions they expect, and what to do at home.



Getting the most out of physiotherapy

- Do the exercises. Most of the benefit in trials came from regular practice.
- Mild, short-lived soreness as you move more is normal and is not a sign of damage.
- Ask what the plan is if you are not improving after several weeks.
- Be wary of open-ended courses of passive treatment with no exercise in them.
- Tell your physio about new numbness, weakness, or pain spreading down an arm or leg.



Warning signs: get urgent help

Call 999 or go to A&E if you have:

- Numbness around your genitals, bottom or inner thighs, new problems passing urine, or loss of bladder or bowel control
- New or worsening weakness in your legs or arms
- Clumsy hands, unsteady walking or electric shock feelings with neck pain
- Back or neck pain with a fever, unexplained weight loss, or a history of cancer



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Read the full physiotherapy guide, with references:

spinemathema.com/guides

Voices created with AI: Mr Sadek's voice from a script he has reviewed. Sam is a fictional AI physiotherapist.

General information only, not personal medical advice. Please speak to your GP or specialist.