



Prevention. Care. Recovery.

Active and Working!

Managing Acute Low Back Pain in the Workplace

**NATIONAL
HEALTH
COMMITTEE**

NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE
ON HEALTH AND DISABILITY

HUNGA KAITIHIRO I TE HAUORA O TE TANGATA

An employer's guide

Active and Working - an overview

THESE ARE THE KEY STEPS TO HELPING EMPLOYEES WITH ACUTE LOW BACK PAIN STAY IN WORK. THESE SIMPLE STRATEGIES, EXPLAINED IN THIS GUIDE, CAN HELP YOU MINIMISE WORK LOSS AND PREVENT ONGOING PROBLEMS.

	YOUR EMPLOYEE CAN	AS THE EMPLOYER, YOU CAN	THE TREATMENT PROVIDER CAN
BEFORE A PROBLEM OCCURS		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up your systems • Identify advisors you can use • Prepare functional job descriptions 	
ONSET OF PAIN (UP TO 1 WEEK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use self-help approach • Take simple pain relief • Stay active and modify activities if necessary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage early reporting of pain 	
REPORT PAIN (UP TO 1 WEEK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report pain if tasks or safety affected • Tell work about difficult tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activate your systems • Respond quickly with modified tasks/hours • Review any worksite factors involved • Make recommended changes • Be aware of 'flags' and serious symptoms • Keep records 	
SEEK TREATMENT (IF NO IMPROVEMENT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay active and at work • Follow treatment advice about work tasks and hours, activities, pain relief 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster 'stay in work' approach • Identify suitable tasks and hours • Assign someone to keep in touch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check for Red Flags • Encourage to 'stay in work' • Reassure and explain • Advise on work tasks and hours, activities, pain relief
IF OFF WORK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep in touch with work • Attend work meetings and social events • Stay active 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set return to work plan • Get occupational advice if needed • Keep in touch - weekly • Liaise with treatment providers - advise of available tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set return to work plan • Encourage activity • Refer for expert treatment • Identify and address Yellow Flags
RETURN TO WORK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gradually increase hours and tasks • Continue as many usual activities as possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start graded return to work plan • Get occupational advice if needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review regularly • Encourage activity • Address ongoing Yellow Flags
ONGOING SYMPTOMS (4-12 WEEKS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell work about tasks that are still difficult • Stop unhelpful treatment • Consider work options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suggest all parties meet to discuss employment options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensify return to work efforts • Stop unhelpful treatments • Use people with expertise in workplace rehabilitation • Liaise with Case Manager

Foreword

Nearly all adults experience back pain during their working lives. This common problem has become one of the leading causes of work loss in industrialised countries. It is clearly an expensive problem for our society, resulting in lost productivity and individual suffering.

The effective management of back pain has undergone one of the most radical changes witnessed in the history of modern health care. Traditional concepts emphasising bed rest and passive treatment have been demonstrated as ineffective by high quality scientific research. Instead it has been shown that keeping a person as active as possible in their normal life is the most effective method of managing the problem. The role of the workplace in facilitating rapid rehabilitation has therefore become a principal focus.

It is now inappropriate to think of work merely as a place to return to once a person is fully recovered. We know that the workplace is integral to the rehabilitation process. Employers (through managers and supervisors) have a critical role in providing the opportunity for a person with back pain to maintain their work habits and daily routine through the temporary provision of a safe and accommodating workplace.

This important Guide is the fourth in a sequence that has been designed to inform treatment providers and the public of the most effective methods of managing acute low back pain. The previous publications were the *New Zealand Acute Low Back Pain Guide*, the *Guide to Assessing Psychosocial Yellow Flags: Risk Factors for Long-Term Disability and Work Loss*, and the *Patient Guide to Acute Low Back Pain Management*. Each of these documents has been based on the best scientific evidence available.

ACC and the National Health Committee initiated the acute low back pain guideline development process in New Zealand. This guide is further evidence of their commitment to reduce the pain and disability, including work loss, associated with acute low back pain.

Active and Working – Managing Acute Low Back Pain in the Workplace was produced with extensive national and international expert consultation. It accurately reflects the current scientific evidence. It is clear that much effort is still needed for all key players to understand this approach.

The Overview chart inside the front cover provides you with a summary of what each key player can do at every stage of a back pain problem. Each component of this process is clearly explained in the Guide. It is strongly recommended that readers take the time to familiarise themselves with this detail.



Dr Nicholas Kendall
Chairman – Acute Low Back Pain Expert Panel

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IF YOU'D LIKE MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ANYTHING IN THIS GUIDE, CALL US ON 0800 477 476.

Low backs can be a pain

Acute low back pain is very common and causes significant costs in terms of suffering, lost work time and profitability, treatment and compensation. But the latest findings from around the world show that acute low back pain can be effectively managed. And one of the most important key players is you – the employer.

This guide brings you up to date information, and outlines strategies you can use in your workplace to minimise the impact on both your business and your employees. You might find some of it quite surprising – ideas on how to manage acute low back pain have undergone a radical reversal.

We have focused entirely on the **management** of acute low back pain – rather than covering prevention. Why? Quite simply because, unlike with serious injuries, acute low back pain is common and it's almost impossible to prevent. And unfortunately it often results in lost work time – even when the pain didn't start at work.

The good news is that quick action and proper management works – and in most cases improvement is relatively quick. It doesn't have to become an ongoing problem for you and your employee.

The prevention and management of serious back injuries remains an important issue for employers. However, a full discussion of serious back injuries is beyond the scope of this guide.

Active and working helps backs best! We now know that staying active and at work, even if tasks have to be modified for a time, helps people recover better and more quickly. And of course faster recovery means less work time lost – so everyone benefits.

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What is acute low back pain about?

Acute low back pain is common (nine out of ten people will feel it at some time) but it's not usually serious. Where once the advice given was to lie down and rest, it is now clear that staying active and at work, if possible, is extremely important – it helps speed the recovery process. Scientific views on acute low back pain and its management have changed dramatically. Here's a quick overview.

How does it happen?

The reasons are not clear, although there are some known risk factors. People may associate the onset of acute low back pain with work, sport or home activities – or it can occur for no particular reason. It often starts during an everyday activity that has not caused pain before. A small proportion of acute low back pain begins due to an accident such as slipping or falling.

What are the risk factors?

There have been many studies and there is a lot of debate over risk factors. All that we can confidently state is that there can be a range of causes and often there is no definable event at all.

There is some evidence that heavy work, lots of lifting and forceful movements, bending and twisting, and a lot of driving are risk factors. Heredity, gender and build make little difference. Keeping fit, not smoking and avoiding excess weight may help prevent acute low back pain – but are more likely to have a greater impact on recovery than prevention.

Is it serious?

In most cases it's not possible to give a specific diagnosis – and the term 'non-specific' is often used to describe the condition. In fact, exact diagnosis isn't necessary for effective management in most cases. Serious back injuries or disease are not common. Serious conditions are easily detected and usually require specialist treatment. This guide only covers non-specific acute low back pain.

What is the impact?

Non-specific acute low back pain can cause quite high levels of pain and difficulty with daily tasks. But the presence of pain doesn't mean that work and activity are harmful (research shows the opposite). The pain is usually self-limiting, so your employee may not be able to do some tasks for a short time. But severe symptoms won't last long and usually improve in a few days, or a few weeks at most. During this time the way you assist your employee can have a marked effect on their recovery.

What can I do?

As an employer you have a key role in helping staff to recover quickly. In the severe stages most people benefit from advice and strategies to help them

- report their pain appropriately
- seek suitable treatment
- modify or continue their work.

Someone with acute low back pain also needs support and reassurance – they may be worried about their job. If they do need time off work, it's important to keep in touch.

Of course how acute low back pain is managed in the workplace depends on the tasks the person usually does, what they can cope with and their treatment provider's advice¹. The most important thing is that it is managed. This has benefits for both your staff and your business.

Taking control benefits everyone. As an employer you have a key role. Managing acute low back pain in the workplace benefits your staff and your business. It can cut the cost of lost work time and productivity and helps reduce extra costs such as recruitment, retraining and compensation.

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¹ *By treatment provider we mean a doctor, nurse, physiotherapist, chiropractor, osteopath or Maori healer.*

Employers are key players

As an employer you have a key role in helping staff recover quickly from acute low back pain. Assisting staff to stay at work – or to return as soon as they can – helps the recovery process and reduces the cost to your business.

How does work help?

Research shows that people who are off work for long periods are **less likely** to return to work than those who are only off work for a short time, or who stay at work doing modified tasks.

Work is important to recovery for many reasons. For instance it can provide purpose, a sense of identity, social contacts, the opportunity to develop skills and financial security. So the best thing you can do is to help your employee stay at work – or to return as early as possible if they need time off.

But does it help me?

Keeping people at work, or speeding their return, is good for business – and it can help reduce costs. The cost of lost work time and compensation can be easily measured, but there are also hidden costs such as recruitment, retraining and lost productivity to consider. And of course ongoing lost work time can affect the risk assessment for your workplace or industry – and your premium.

What do I need to do?

The workplace is extremely important in ensuring an early and safe return to work. You can't just leave it up to the employee or their treatment provider – everyone needs to work closely together.

The workplace environment is vital. You need to

- have good management systems in place before the problem occurs
- show a commitment and interest in helping staff stay at work, or return early
- provide options for modified work tasks² and a gradual return to work³
- foster co-operation between the treatment provider, workplace and employee.

Identifying and managing the factors that can delay or stop people returning to work are also important. Once slow recovery was put down to the physical demands of work. Now there is a lot of information to show that psychosocial factors are also influential (see page 12).

² A modified work task could mean a change in the task itself – or how long it is done for – but the change is made with the intention that it is not permanent and the person will return to full duties. Other terms commonly used to mean the same include alternative, transitional, or light duties.

³ A gradual or graded return to work could mean gradually increasing the hours at work each day – or attending for normal hours but working intermittently, say every second hour, for a while.

Studies show that people have less time off work – for any reason – when the workplace is friendly and supportive, when tasks are varied, demands are reasonable and there is a good level of job satisfaction.

What can I do now?

Having good systems in place will help you manage the situation better when a problem does occur – whether it's acute low back pain or another injury or illness. Here are some steps you can take now:

- Create a work environment that enables staff to ask for help. Make sure they know that you are willing to provide modified work tasks so they can stay at work
- Set up systems for reporting and recording cases – and for communication between all parties. Everyone needs to be clear about when and how to report a problem – and what their roles are
- Nominate someone to manage cases. This could be someone like a human resources or health and safety professional, or someone external like a case manager or occupational therapist
- Identify a treatment provider who can act in an advisory role – someone who knows the issues in your workplace and who can provide staff with workplace-based guidance
- Prepare functional job descriptions with lists of alternative tasks that can be given to treatment providers as needed. You may want to seek professional help with this.

Can I prevent back pain occurring?

Injury prevention programmes that focus on reducing employees' exposure to very heavy loads, extreme bending and twisting, excessive whole-body vibration, and falls from a height can help prevent serious back injuries. However, studies show it's almost impossible to prevent the more common 'acute low back pain' because there are many factors involved. But the condition can be managed to help stop it becoming an on-going problem for you and your employee.

It's also essential to investigate any workplace situation that may have contributed to the problem – so the person can do their job and to help prevent things getting worse. When problems do arise there is usually a chain of events, such as stressful deadlines, increased work loads and other workplace hazards – so you may need to address more than one factor to make your workplace safe.

The management of low back pain at work is most likely to be successful in a workplace where priority is given to health and safety at all levels of the organisation.

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Here is a summary of the most important things you can do to promote recovery once acute low back pain has occurred. There may be non-work factors you can't control that will slow recovery – but you can make up for this by intensifying efforts in the areas you do have control over.

Identify and modify 'difficult' tasks

Pain may make some tasks too difficult to do for a while. Not everyone is affected the same, so you'll need to consider what your employee tells you they can do and what their treatment provider recommends. Generally the most difficult tasks involve heavy work, lots of lifting and forceful movements, bending and twisting, or a lot of driving.

Encourage graded return to work

If your employee needs time off, a graded return can help them get back to work sooner. You may need professional help to work out a plan. A good plan usually sets out hours and tasks as well as what progress can be expected. Some people insist on working even if they are getting worse. Modified tasks may help in these cases. Discuss this with them and enlist the help of their treatment provider if necessary.

Can you see the progress? Reducing pain is one measure of improvement. But changes you are more likely to see first include ability to work longer and do more tasks, more periods of comfort, better morale, and a feeling of improved strength and fitness. An action plan can help make progress more visible to the person with low back pain. It should include simple goals (like being able to do the dishes or go to a movie) and activities which can bring relief (like listening to music and walking). There's a planner in the *Patient Guide to Acute Low Back Pain Management* (see References, page 17).

Modify the plan if necessary

If progress is slower than expected you may need to modify the plan. The treatment provider or case manager may be able to help.

Address workplace factors

It's important to address workplace factors that may have been involved in the onset of pain:

- Investigate accidents or injuries immediately
- Make changes to minimise future problems – expert advice may help
- Have clear health and safety policies – and follow them.

Keep in touch

Assign someone to keep in weekly contact with your employee (maybe their manager or the person your company has nominated to look after cases). If they're off work ask co-workers to also call them each week. Let them know their work is valued and you're looking forward to their return. Invite them to staff training, meetings, morning tea and social events. Encourage them to return.

Talk with the treatment provider

Contact with the person treating your employee is important, especially if recovery is delayed. Let them know what work tasks are available and seek their advice on suitable tasks and a return to work plan. This is where having a pre-prepared functional job description comes in handy.

You can expect the treatment provider to carry out regular reviews, especially if someone is off work. If you're concerned about how long someone is off work (two weeks could be too long) call the treatment provider. If you're concerned about your employee's progress, suggest they visit their treatment provider again, or call them yourself.

Making contact with treatment providers can be tricky. It's good to contact the treatment provider and show your support by explaining the options at your workplace. If you want to discuss the employee you'll need to involve them in the process, and you'll need consent to share health or personal information. If there's a problem it's best to contact the case manager (if one has been assigned) so they can work with everyone to try and resolve things.

Create the right environment

Studies show that people are less likely to have time off (for any reason) when

- their job content is well defined, demands are reasonable, tasks are varied and there is a good level of job satisfaction
- the workplace is friendly, there is good support from co-workers and there are no conflicts with other staff or supervisors.

Watch for those who need extra support

There are some people who find it harder to get back to work. They may have had back pain before, think work will harm their back, do heavy work or not always enjoy their job. It's important to keep a special eye out for these people – and it may help to call in a treatment provider early if you think the person needs extra support.

If improvement is much slower than expected, ask for a meeting between yourself, your employee, their case manager and treatment provider to help sort out any underlying issues. Around four weeks is a good time to do this if your employee is still off work.

Some points to remember

- Acute low back pain is common
- The exact causes are unclear, although there are some known risk factors
- The best treatment is to stay active and at work – with temporary modifications if needed
- There are many factors, physical and non-physical, that can affect returning to work
- The workplace has a key role to play in helping people stay at work or return early.

Take an active role. Support and encouragement to work can speed recovery. Just waiting until your employee is pain-free, or leaving it all up to the treatment provider can slow it down.

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When should you get involved?

Early intervention is the key to successfully managing acute low back pain. There are many simple strategies that can be used to help recovery and prevent a claim. It's also important to know when seeking treatment and making a claim is the best course of action.

When do you need to know?

You need a system in place to encourage your employees to report acute low back pain early. Early reporting and management can help prevent problems and claims. As a simple guide, staff should report their pain as soon as they can't complete work tasks or carry them out safely – or if their pain is getting worse. This is important even if the pain started outside work. Although non-work related pain won't affect your premiums, it can still affect your employees' safety and productivity at work.

Staff should be clear about when and how to let you know there is a problem.

What do you need to do next?

Most people will try some form of self-management first (such as taking pain medication). So reporting their pain means that they are telling you they need help. Quick action at this stage can speed the recovery process and prevent problems. The most important early steps you can take include

- modifying tasks that are difficult to do
- addressing workplace factors involved
- encouraging the employee to stay in work.

There's more about proven strategies on pages 8 and 12. You may require specialised help with rehabilitation advice and workplace assessments. Large companies often have on-site occupational health nurses or doctors who can provide these services. Other businesses may need to seek advice from treatment providers.

When should treatment advice be sought?

If you have taken steps to modify tasks or hours and this doesn't bring improvements you need to encourage your employee to seek treatment advice. Remember some people will continue on regardless and this puts them at risk of an ongoing problem – so you need to take an active role.

We're not suggesting you should make decisions related to someone seeking treatment – but it's important that you know what to look out for. Your employee definitely needs to seek advice from a treatment provider if they mention the following symptoms:

- Severe, worsening low back pain despite efforts to relieve it
- Generally feeling unwell
- Difficulty with bowel or bladder control
- Numbness in the groin
- Unsteadiness when walking
- Pins and needles or pain in the leg.

How can the treatment provider help?

Unfortunately there is no 'quick fix' for acute low back pain. The treatment provider can provide reassurance and encouragement to continue normal activities. And they can advise on pain relief, treatment, appropriate exercise and modifying activities (your functional job description will help them make decisions about suitable work tasks). They'll also check for any serious problems.

There are also treatment providers who specialise in occupational or workplace advice. They can help by assessing the physical tasks your employee can do and matching them to your worksite – and with 'work hardening' programmes to help the employee regain their strength.

If your employee is off work or not recovering well you need to liaise with them and their treatment provider. Everyone needs to work together closely to monitor progress and deal with problems quickly.

Is it a claim? There can be many factors involved in acute low back pain – it's not always due to injury. The treatment provider must decide if their patient should make a claim by considering all the circumstances surrounding the onset of pain and taking a fair view.

Here's a couple of tricky issues...

What if recovery is delayed?

Sometimes, despite everyone's efforts, your employee may not be able to return to their old job. You need to arrange a case meeting to identify what they can and can't do. You may need a treatment provider with specialist skills to help with this. It may be a good idea for the employee to have a support person or a union representative present. The outcome might be that you can offer your employee an alternative job. If not, you can still help them on the road to recovery by liaising with the case manager and helping your employee to find a new job.

Should you employ someone with back pain?

Some employers are concerned about taking on people who have had back pain in the past. But low back pain is very common and not usually serious. And whilst many people have more than one episode of pain it is usually short-lived. With good health and safety procedures in your workplace a recurrence, if any, should have a minimal effect. So it makes better sense to employ the best person for the job than to be overly concerned about whether back pain will recur.

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Treatment is only one aspect of managing acute low back pain – but it can be an important one. Here we explain the current ‘state of the art’ treatment for acute low back pain. This information can help you support your employee. If their treatment seems markedly different or things are not improving it’s important to ask how you can help – and to take an active role. A co-operative approach between you, your employee and their treatment provider will provide the best results.

The first visit – what happens?

The treatment provider will examine your employee and take their history. They will try and identify the circumstances relating to the onset of pain.

If there are indicators of a serious problem (Red Flags), the treatment provider may investigate further with blood tests or X-rays for example – or refer your employee to a specialist. There’s no need for X-rays or scans in the first four weeks unless there are Red Flags.

If the acute low back pain is not due to a serious problem the best treatment will be

- assurance and explanation
- advice to continue usual activities at home
- advice to continue work if appropriate
- simple pain relief (paracetamol and anti-inflammatories)
- manipulation (in the first four to six weeks only).

Work activities or hours may need to be modified. Some home activities may also need to be modified but should be continued where possible. Bed rest for more than two days is not recommended.

What are Red and Yellow Flags?

Red Flags help identify potentially serious conditions. Yellow Flags indicate psychosocial barriers to recovery.

Red Flags include...	Yellow Flags include ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Severe worsening pain, especially at night• Significant trauma (such as a fall from height)• Problems controlling legs, bladder, bowel• Numbness in the groin• Weight loss, history of cancer, fever• Use of intravenous drugs or prescribed steroids (for example asthma drugs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Belief that pain and activity are harmful• ‘Sickness behaviours’ (like extended rest)• Low or negative moods, social withdrawal• Treatment that doesn’t fit ‘best practice’• Problems with claim and compensation• History of back pain, time off, other claims• Problems at work, poor job satisfaction• Heavy work, unsociable hours• Overprotective family – or lack of support

What about ongoing treatment?

The treatment provider, you and the employee should work together to ensure that things improve as expected. Regular review is important, particularly if the symptoms are severe, activity is severely limited, there is a history of recurrent pain or there are barriers to recovery.

If the symptoms persist and don't reduce in intensity after four weeks, a full reassessment is needed. This should include a history and examination, screening for Red and Yellow Flags, appropriate investigations, ongoing treatment and X-rays. Scans and surgery are usually not required unless there are Red Flags.

What if the pain recurs?

Many people have more than one episode of acute low back pain. This doesn't mean that it's serious, although the pain may be severe and limit activity. There is strong evidence that the symptoms will pass quickly and that staying in work, with modified tasks if necessary, is the best treatment.

Once the presence of Red Flags has been eliminated it's okay to take simple pain medication and keep going – it won't cause harm. But it's still important to try and improve workplace factors that aggravate pain.

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Acute low back pain impacts on a number of life areas. Most people will need support from a variety of sources during their recovery.

What can the employee do?

Your employee can help themselves by

- taking control of the problem
- staying as active as possible
- reporting their low back pain early
- identifying the tasks and hours they can do
- seeking treatment if they need it
- following the advice in the *Patient Guide to Acute Low Back Pain Management*
- keeping in touch if they are off work.

What can you do as the employer?

You need to be proactive in ensuring your employee gets the best available help, gets back to work as soon as possible and has a safe work environment to come back to.

This means that you need to

- set up clear reporting and recording systems
- address circumstances that lead to low back pain
- make 'staying in work' part of your health and safety policy
- assign someone to keep in touch with your employee and their treatment provider
- tell the treatment provider about available work tasks
- know where to get advice on rehabilitation and return to work plans.

What is the role of treatment providers?

Treatment providers can help people stay in work by

- giving 'best practice' advice based on the evidence
- assessing work tasks and encouraging people to stay at work
- liaising with employers and case managers
- reviewing their patient's progress regularly
- referring patients for expert treatment if they don't improve.

Who else can help?

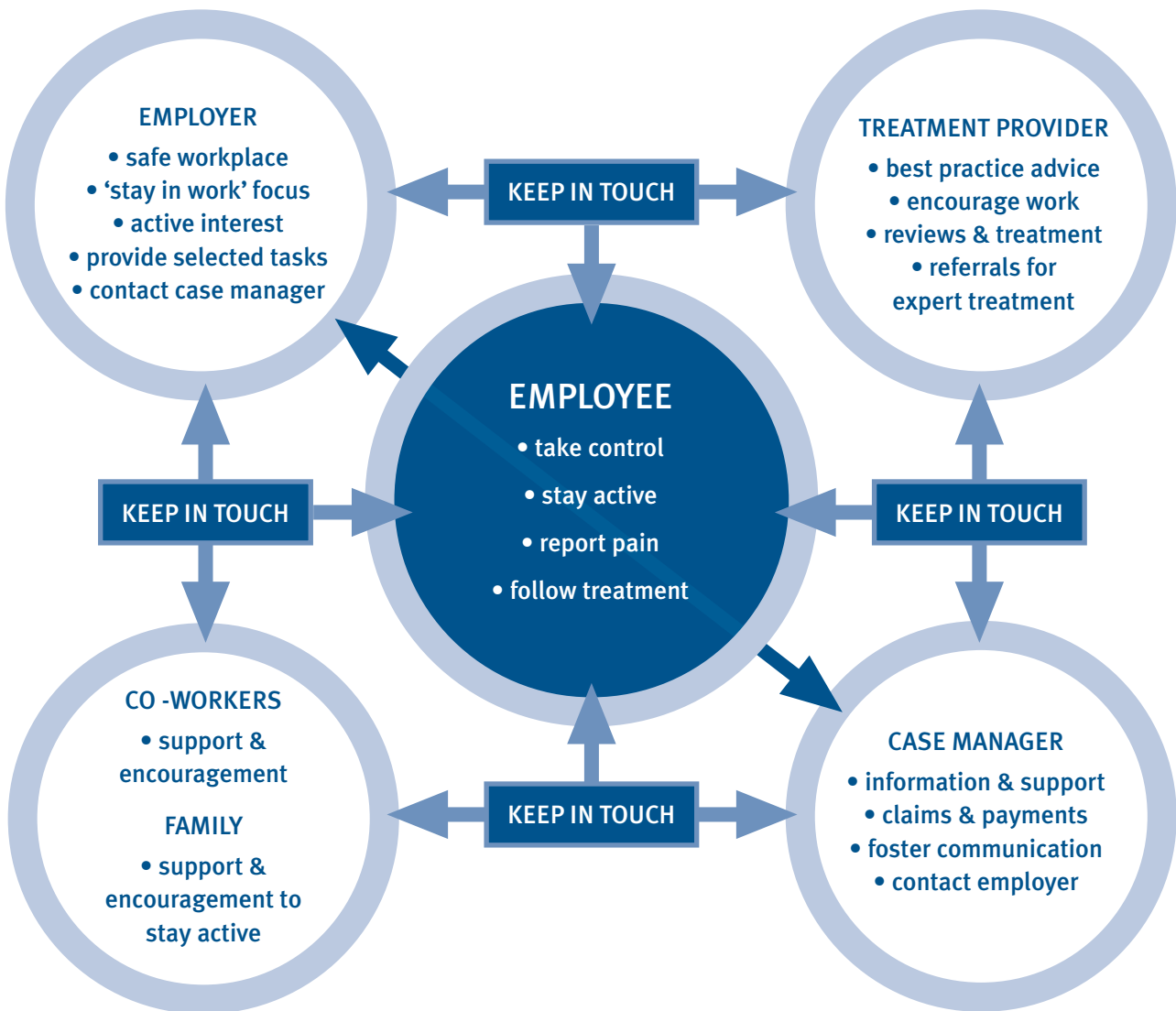
Case managers usually get involved if someone is off work. They can help with queries about claims and payments, tell you who can help with rehabilitation and return to work plans, and liaise between everyone involved in supporting the person with the back pain.

Your employee's partner and family can provide support and encouragement to keep your employee active and at work, and ensure they stick to their treatment programme.

Co-workers and colleagues have an important role. Studies show that support from co-workers can help people return to work faster. Encourage your staff to stay in touch with people who are off work.

Everyone has a role to play

STAY IN WORK OR RETURN EARLY – MODIFY ACTIVITIES IF NEEDED



Resources and contacts

For advice on...	You could contact...	At...
Injury prevention and rehabilitation	ACC Injury Prevention	0800 477 476
Treatment providers <i>(These organisations can direct you to treatment providers in your area)</i>	NZ Society of Physiotherapists Royal NZ College of General Practitioners NZ Register of Osteopaths NZ Chiropractic Association NZ Association of Occupational Therapists NZ Nurses' Association	04-801 6500 04-496 5999 04-387 3454 09-360 2089 04-473 6510 04-494 6385
Case management	ACC or insurance companies	Your nearest branch
Workplace ergonomics	New Zealand Ergonomics Society	PO Box 802, Palmerston North
Occupational health and safety legislation	Occupational Safety and Health Division, Department of Labour	04-385 7771
Employment matters	NZ Employers' Federation NZ Council of Trade Unions	04-499 4111 04-385 1334
Business matters	Chamber of Commerce	Your regional branch

You may prefer to look up local services in the Yellow Pages – you'll find them under Occupational Health and Safety, or Health Services. All reputable providers should be willing to supply details of their experience, education, professional affiliations and areas of expertise and success.

Another helpful resource is the *Safeguard Buyers Guide: Directory of Workplace Health and Safety Products and Services* (available from www.safeguard.co.nz).

Other guides in this series

This guide is part of a series developed by ACC Injury Prevention and the National Health Committee of the Ministry of Health. There is a practical self-help guide for patients – the *Patient Guide to Acute Low Back Pain Management*. This is freely available in patient waiting rooms around the country, or from ACC. There are also two guides for treatment providers – the *New Zealand Acute Low Back Pain Guide* and the *Guide to Assessing Psychosocial Yellow Flags in Acute Low Back Pain*.

Managing acute low back pain is one aspect of a comprehensive health and safety programme. If you'd like more information about developing a programme for your workplace – call us on 0800 477 476.

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 - Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners
 - New Zealand Register of Osteopaths
 - New Zealand Chiropractic Association
 - New Zealand Association of Occupational Therapists
 - New Zealand Ergonomics Society
- the Employers' and Manufacturers' Association, the New Zealand Employers' Federation, and employers throughout New Zealand
- Dr Kim Burton, Director, Spinal Research Unit, University of Huddersfield, United Kingdom
- Professor Gordon Waddell, Orthopaedic Surgeon, Glasgow, Scotland
- Combined Trade Unions

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Accident Rehabilitation, Compensation and Insurance Corporation and the National Health Committee, Ministry of Health. Wellington, New Zealand. January 1997.

Patient Guide to Acute Low Back Pain Management

Accident Rehabilitation, Compensation and Insurance Corporation and the National Health Committee, Ministry of Health. Wellington, New Zealand. May 1998.

What is acute low back pain about?

Employers are key players

You can help speed recovery

When should you get involved?

An update on current treatment

Everyone has a role to play

Resources & contacts

Workplace checklist



- Are you committed to health and safety at all levels of your organisation?
- Is there anything you can do to improve the work environment?
- Do you have clear reporting and recording procedures for accidents, injury, illness?
- Is supporting staying in work/early return a company policy?
- Do you know who can help with workplace assessment and return to work plans?

WHEN AN EMPLOYEE REPORTS ACUTE LOW BACK PAIN...

- Do you review the circumstances leading up to the acute low back pain?
- Do you implement recommended changes to job tasks, content or worksite?
- Could the employee stay in work doing normal tasks – or with modified tasks or hours if necessary?
- Have you let the treatment provider know about the range of tasks available?
- Have you assigned someone to keep in touch?
- Has the 'Action plan' on page 10 of the *Patient Guide to Acute Low Back Pain Management* been completed?

IF YOUR EMPLOYEE IS OFF WORK...

- Can you implement a graded return to work plan?
- Do you keep in regular contact?
- Is the treatment provider doing regular reviews?
- Have you sought expert advice on workplace-based rehabilitation?
- If return to work is proving difficult have you suggested a meeting with everyone involved?
- Has the 'Return to work plan' on page 11 of the *Patient Guide to Acute Low Back Pain Management* been completed?



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