

2b. Red Flag Symptoms – Back Pain

Red flags for back pain include:

- saddle anaesthesia
- recent onset of bladder dysfunction or faecal incontinence
- major trauma, minor trauma, or even just strenuous lifting in people with osteoporosis
- structural deformity of the spine
- past history of cancer, corticosteroid use, or HIV
- constitutional symptoms such as fever, chills, or unexplained weight loss
- intravenous (IV) drug abuse or immune suppression
- severe night pain
- thoracic pain (aortic aneurysm)
- widespread neurological symptoms, including gait abnormality

Consider the possibility of inflammatory back disease such as ankylosing spondylitis and refer to rheumatology where appropriate. Answering 'yes' to the following questions indicates increased risk:

1. Did your back pain start when you were aged 40 or under?
2. Did your back pain develop gradually?
3. Does your back pain improve with exercise?
4. Do you find there is no improvement in your back pain when you rest?
5. Do you suffer from back pain at night which improves upon getting up?