

Development of Back-to-Fit: a digital self-management platform to help people with mechanical low back pain to be active and exercise – Physiotherapists’ perspectives

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Background: Low back pain (LBP) is currently ranked as the greatest contributor to disability. Best practice guidelines including NICE guidelines, recommend self-management (SM) and endorse advice to engage in physical activity (PA) and exercise. However, people find this challenging as a result of the complex biopsychosocial nature of LBP. While digital interventions offer a promising mode of delivering SM, the evidence base for their effectiveness is poor. Available interventions providing general guidance fail to acknowledge the complexity of the problem and offering personalized exercise solutions.

Aim: To explore physiotherapists perspectives to inform the development of ‘Back-to-Fit’ tool offering personalised SM solutions for people with mechanical low back pain (MLBP) to enhance their exercise engagement and PA.

Methods: A qualitative study (3 focus groups), were conducted with 14 clinically active physiotherapists working with LBP from England and Wales, and with more than 5 years’ experience. Focus group data was analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: Four overarching priori themes were identified: assessment, exercise prescription, technology solution and delivery. Findings included the need for a comprehensive assessment, patient-education, feedback and progression-regression of exercises. A significant focus was on the requirement of an individualised approach of delivering SM using technology, while acknowledging biopsychosocial factors. The results suggest the potential use of a prudently designed digital intervention as a catalyst to improve SM in people with MLBP.

Conclusion: The findings will inform the content of tailored assessment and exercise features of Back-to-Fit intervention. This will be evaluated with people with MLBP for its’ usability, acceptability and effectiveness.