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Management of Low Back Pain in the Outpatient Setting

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Low Back Pain Management

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- Colchester Family Medicine
- December 2024
- **Dr. Amalia Kane**

The Problem with Low Back Pain...

Non-specific low back pain affects people of all ages and is a leading contributor to disease burden worldwide.⁷

A 2018 study suggests an increase in years lived with low back pain by 54%. This increase leads to low back pain being considered a leading cause of disability worldwide.⁴

It is important to note that clinical evaluation is highly specific for identifying low back pain, as research suggests ~90% of low back pain is non-specific, with no radiologic findings to suggest a cause.⁵

Patients often lack the time, finances, or motivation to seek out or follow through with physical therapy treatment. Multiple patients have asked what exercises they can do when physical therapy is recommended. The current documents available through Epic are disjunct, and don't provide an up to date culmination of the exercises physical therapists and athletic trainers are currently using.

This project will address medical practice transformation by providing a comprehensive list of current recommendations and exercises collected through interviews and literature review.

Public Health Cost

As noted, clinical evaluation for low back pain is highly specific. ⁵

While the cost is difficult to directly measured, low back pain is a leading cause of disability globally for at least the past three decades and has resulted in enormous direct healthcare and lost productivity costs. ³

Of note, low back pain disproportionately has the greatest impact middle and low-income countries. ⁴

This cost is seen in hospital systems not having the necessary infrastructure to manage the high volume of patients with low back pain, and patients not being in an economic position to take the time to participate in treatment. ⁴

Community Perspective of Low Back Pain

“Back pain is like memory foam, once it starts it will always linger and come back eventually”

“Patients often bring up back pain as you are walking out the door of the visit, it’s a true door handle problem”

“Lower back pain might be the most common issue patients have”

“Patients often don’t want to take the time to manage their low back pain. But if you are able to have them understand that they own the problem and the longitudinal outcome of their symptoms, they become more willing to participate in treatment.”

“We have found that patients have the greatest success when we send them with ‘homework.’ They seem less motivated to participate in the exercises that will benefit them in office and seem to show the same if not better benefit when they take on these exercises at home.”

“Doing exercises for low back pain is like brushing your teeth. If you want to live without cavities you brush your teeth everyday. If you want to live without back pain, you need to do your exercises consistently.”

“While patients would benefit from physical therapy, most are not inclined to participate due to cost, time, and a desire for immediate resolution.”

Methodology/Intervention

Numerous studies point to the benefits of Physical Therapy, NSAIDs, and lifestyle modifications as the initial treatment options.

Further, budding research demonstrates passive individual stretching has similar benefits to physical therapy guided strength programs for low back pain,¹¹ as well as the benefits of walking exercise for helping and preventing low back pain.¹⁰

The concepts of physical therapy, NSAIDs, lifestyle modifications, stretching, and walking are all further reviewed through meta analysis, suggesting that these are the most beneficial options for patients.⁸

Using literature reviews and community interviews, a dot phrase (.LOWBACKPAIN) that quickly summarizes non-specific low back pain, provides patients with exercises, and contingencies for further evaluation was developed.

Results

Providers were interested in being able to provide patients with exercises, and information, in a quick and timely manner.

The dot phrase was well received by physicians with good initial enthusiasm to utilize the dot phrase.

Patients felt the information was succinct, easy to understand.

Evaluation

While most physicians had a systematic approach to managing low back pain, this dot phrase provided an update on the most recent research and management.

The dot phrase quickly summarized information on low back pain, the appropriate exercises for initial management, and the necessary information for when further evaluation is necessary.

While this dot phrase provides information for managing nonspecific low back pain, it does not address the psychosocial aspects that can contribute to low back pain.

Future Research

Continue to monitor trends in treatment of low back pain, and update existing dot phrase accordingly.

Evaluate patient satisfaction with presented treatment options and exercises

Assess at subsequent patient follow up visits subjective scoring of low back pain

Track subsequent follow up visits for low back pain after patient is provided the information

Incorporate nutritional information into existing dot phrase as lifestyle modification and weight loss have shown benefit in managing low back pain

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