

Timing is crucial to success of low back pain treatment

By Joe Waller, MPT



The prevalence of low back pain in modern society has reached epidemic proportions. It is estimated that in any given year, up to 36% of the population will experience low back pain, and that 8 of 10 people will have experienced low back pain by the age of 20. Low back pain is the leading cause of activity limitation and work absence throughout much of the world, and total health care dollars spent on the treatment of low back pain approaches that of cancer and diabetes.

Low back pain is non-discriminative. It appears in all strata of society, with higher occurrence rates in women and those with lower educational status. Normally felt in the lower back, the pain can spread to the buttocks and cause nerve irritation leading to leg pain and numbness, and tingling in the toes. Common risk factors increasing your chance of developing low back pain include lifestyle factors such as bending and lifting improperly, sitting too much and being out of shape. The type of job you have

can also increase your risk of developing low back pain. Material workers have been reported to have a low back pain prevalence of 39%. Workers classified as holding sedentary positions have a prevalence rate approaching 20%.

Individuals seeking relief from low back pain account for 50% of all outpatient physical therapy visits — and the sooner you seek treatment, the better the outcome. Early intervention with manual physical therapy has been shown to reduce the risk of patients with acute low back pain converting to patients with chronic symptoms. Patients receiving a referral to a manual physical therapist (less than four weeks from symptom onset), compared to being referred after three months, were less likely to receive injections and required less frequent physician visits. This is in contrast to conventional medical management, which incorporates more of a wait and see approach.

Research has confirmed that physical therapy for low back pain is evidence-based and cost-effective. Systematic reviews of the literature related to the treatment of low back pain show that manual physical therapy is as effective as prescription NSAIDs for pain relief, and superior to exercise and general practice medical care for reducing disability in the long term. A recent study of individuals with acute low back pain indicates that patients

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not receiving manual physical therapy intervention are eight times more likely to experience a worsening in disability. In another study, patients who did not receive specific muscle retraining exercises had an 80% recurrence rate.


How does a physical therapist treat low back pain?

The success of any treatment depends, in part, on the individual actually having the condition the treatment purports to amend. A skilled physical therapist is essential for evaluating your symptoms in order to tailor treatment to your specific problem. Physical therapy treatment of low back pain utilizes a multi-modal approach. That is,

your treatment will include manual therapy interventions and exercise therapy. Manual therapy encompasses a wide range of techniques including Thrust Joint Manipulation, Joint Mobilization, Muscle Energy Technique, Myofascial Release and Trigger Point Release. It is essential that your physical therapist has received advanced training to become proficient in the palpatory and psychomotor skills required to effectively provide manual therapy interventions.

Depending on your presentation, the best treatment for your condition can vary. By classifying patients into subgroups based on specific examination findings, your physical therapist can better determine which intervention strategies are

most likely to benefit you. For those with acute low back pain, specific manual therapy techniques and exercises to restore motion and decrease leg symptoms related to your back pain is most effective. If the pain is chronic, manual therapy continues to give benefit, while the type of exercise you will perform will focus on fitness and endurance. In all cases, exercises that improve strength, endurance and coordination are added once the pain lessens.

When it comes to low back pain, timing is everything. Seeking early intervention from a manual physical therapist is key in improving overall improvements in pain and disability. Most insurance plans recognize the benefit of early intervention and don't require a physician referral to see a physical therapist. Ultimately, the first step in addressing your low back pain is yours. 



Joe Waller is a physical therapist with Orthopedic & Spine Therapy (OST). He specializes in manual therapy and is currently completing an advanced certification in spinal manipulative therapy. OST is privately owned with 15 clinics and over 20 years of service to Wisconsin. Visit www.ostpt.com for more details.

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