

# THRIVE

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## **Are we Choosing Wisely for back pain?**

Exercise is *the best* treatment for back pain, yet we're wasting healthcare resources on unnecessary scans, injections and surgeries! That's the conclusion of the Back Pain Series published in the Lancet last week. "A major challenge will be to stop the use of harmful practices while ensuring access to effective and affordable healthcare for people with back pain". This series highlighted the enormous problem of back pain for individuals. But importantly it emphasized how we, as a society and healthcare providers could really improve back pain care.

There is a big gap between what treatments are known to be effective and the investigations and treatments that people actually get. Think about it... How many of us head straight for the drug cabinet when we have back pain? Or think we need to get a scan of our back to know what's going on? We may not be doing the right thing. In the vast majority of cases, we're not..... and simple advice about managing back pain, exercise and staying active are really the best first line treatments. Medication is actually considered a second line intervention, as are passive treatments like manual therapy and acupuncture. They have their place, but shouldn't take the place of understanding your pain, moving well and moving more. So, how about embracing the best treatments first, and then looking for other treatments if they're not working?

## **The truth about scans.....**

For most people x-rays or MRIs aren't necessary and can cause unnecessary distress when something that's not so relevant pops up. Over 80% of back pain is unlikely to be serious (fracture, cancer etc). It is only if you're ruling out something serious or considering surgery that you really need a scan, and there are clear pathways available for clinicians to guide ordering this imaging.

## **The 'causes' of most back pain can be complex...**

When we think about the 'causes' of back pain, most people think structurally....what body part is 'causing' the pain? Is it a disc, muscle, joint, or nerve? These structures can contribute to your symptoms but it's a bit more complex than this. As the Lancet series highlights, the cause of back pain is more than structural. How we think, our mood, how much we move, genetics and our broader health all contribute to pain. So when you think 'cause', think beyond your structures....check in on what's happening physically, but also check in on what's happening in your life in general, your health and lifestyle (e.g. sleep, immune system), your emotional well-being and so on. All of these can 'cause' back pain.

We often struggle with this idea for back pain, so let's take a side step and think about something like eczema. What 'causes' eczema? Simplistically, it's inflammation of the skin....but what are the underlying causes? Everything from contact with aggravating chemicals (creams, lotions etc) to diet, poor sleep and stress can be underlying causes of eczema. Back pain is no different. Broadening our perspective can offer more opportunities to recover well and reduce recurrences.

### **Where to from here? Let's start Choosing Wisely.**

The Choosing Wisely global initiative is a two-pronged approach to reduce waste in health systems and ensure people access the best treatments available. If we, as a society, want to have better back pain care and better spinal health we can do a few key things:

- Optimise 'first line' treatments
  - Get some good advice on what's going on and how *you* can manage your pain
  - Stay active
  - Gradually build up an exercise programme
  - Know that not exercising means you're getting second best treatment
  - Be open to psychological therapies for back pain. This doesn't necessarily mean unravelling your past...but having guidance to help you understand pain and how you think about it, as well as allowing this to influence how you cope with and manage your pain has been shown to be really helpful.
  - Actively engage in your treatment- we all love a quick fix where we don't have to do anything, but the evidence says that's not the best treatment for most of us!
- Discuss whether having a scan will really influence your treatment
  - Ask your doctor why they're sending you for a scan and make sure there is a good reason for it
  - Know that not having a scan is not second-best management. In fact, having scans when they're not needed can lead to more worry for you and more unnecessary invasive treatments
- Medications, manual therapy and acupuncture are second line treatments and should only be used as adjuncts to an active programme.
- Injections are only helpful for a small percentage of cases, usually when you have 'nerve root pain'.
- Don't get focused on spinal abnormalities- whether that's findings on a scan or slight asymmetries, for most of us these are normal findings and don't explain pain very well. Chances are we've been living with them for a while without any issue before the pain developed.

If you'd like to read more, the series of papers are freely available at <http://www.thelancet.com/series/low-back-pain>