

Research for Chronic Back Pain

Alexander Technique helps reducing back pain

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A study published in August 2008 by the British Medical Journal (BMJ) demonstrates that Alexander Technique offers an individualized approach to help patients develop skills to recognize, understand and manage the poor habits that affect their posture and influence their back pain. Chronic back pain is notoriously difficult to treat and many people suffer from it for years. It is the biggest cause of sickness absence in many western countries. Surveys about the Canadian population show that lower back pain affects seven in ten people at some time in their lives.

This experiment, run by researchers at the Universities of Southampton and Bristol in England, found that patients who were taught the Alexander Technique and combine it with exercise were significantly better at the end of a year. The patients reported less pain and a better quality of life after taking lessons in the Alexander Technique, and some said they were able to do things which previously had been difficult - such as walking normally or doing household jobs.

Professor Paul Little of Southampton's faculty of medicine and his colleagues recruited 579 patients from general practices in the south and west of England. Each practice wrote to a random selection of patients who had seen a doctor because of recurrent back pain over the previous five years. They excluded any with serious spinal disease and those who had tried the Alexander Technique before. The patients were either given normal care, 6 massage therapy sessions, 6 lessons of the Alexander Technique, or 24 Alexander Technique sessions. Half the patients in each group were also given an exercise programme involving walking briskly for 30 minutes a day, five days a week.

Patients who had been taking Alexander Technique reported less pain and an ability to do more by the end of the year. Those who had 6 lessons and stuck to an exercise routine did almost as well as those who had 24 lessons. Those who combined Alexander Technique with exercise improved by about 40% to 45%, Professor Little said. Generally they had been limited in eight or nine activities, but at the end of the 12 months they could do three or four of those without restriction. Comparing 6 lessons of Alexander Technique with 6 massage treatments, similar outcomes were noted at three months, but the results of the 6 Alexander lessons lasted through the 12 months, while massage benefits did not.

Although most trials of back pain interventions have not had particularly good or convincing results, Professor Paul Little said this one was significant. "This is a good, large, trial. It is good enough evidence for people to take it seriously." The Alexander Technique alleviates back pain by releasing tension in the body. It helps the spine to decompress, improves coordination and flexibility, allows for more balance in the body and alleviates stress. This study shows that one-on-one lessons from a Certified Teacher of the Alexander Technique has positive long-term benefits for chronic back pain patients. **For the full content and more information about the research:** www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/337/aug19_2/a884



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