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Health: Alexander technique 'does ease back pain'

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Chronic back pain, which causes probably more disability and days off work than any other health condition, can be eased through teaching better posture via the Alexander technique, doctors say.

Back pain is notoriously difficult to treat and many people suffer from it for years. It is the biggest cause of sickness absence in the UK and some people are unable to work at all. Lower back pain affects seven in 10 people at some time in their lives.

A study published online today by the British Medical Journal, referring to a trial with 500 patients, offers some hope.

The experiment, run by researchers at the universities of Southampton and Bristol, found that patients who were taught Alexander technique and combined it with exercise were significantly better at the end of a year.

The technique helps align the head, neck and back muscles. The patients reported less pain and a better quality of life after taking up the technique, and some said they were able to do things which previously had been difficult - such as walking normally, getting out and about, and doing household jobs.

Professor Paul Little of Southampton's faculty of medicine and his colleagues recruited 579 patients from 64 GP 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, massage, six lessons of Alexander technique, or 24 lessons. Half the patients in each group were also given an exercise programme involving walking briskly for 30 minutes a day, five days a week.

Massage relieved the pain for the first three months, but the benefit did not last. But patients who had been trained in the Alexander technique reported less pain and an ability to do more by the end of the year. Those who had had six lessons and stuck to an exercise routine did almost as well as those who had 24 lessons.

Little said he was a little surprised at the result. "I had a pretty good suspicion that people who were well-motivated would do well with the technique, but you have to be committed to learning it for it to benefit you. I suspected most folks might not be that committed and so we might not show terribly much." Although most trials of back pain interventions have not had particularly good or convincing results, Little said this one was significant. "This is a good, large, trial. It is good enough evidence for people to take it seriously."

Those who combined Alexander technique with exercise improved by about 40% to 45%, he 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. "It's a simple, cheap intervention," said Little. "But at the moment the Alexander technique is not available on the NHS."

The cost was about £30 a lesson, he said, which would make even a six-lesson course something of a bargain if it cut the amount of NHS time and resources taken up by back pain sufferers.

Backstory

Alexander technique was developed in the 1890s by Frederick Alexander, an Australian actor who feared the hoarse voice he had developed towards the end of performance would finish his career. He reasoned that he was straining his vocal organs through tension not only in his head and neck but in his entire neuromuscular system. The technique aims to restore the body to the easy posture of the young child, re-establishing, according to the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique, the natural relationship between the head, neck and back which form the core of the body. As well as reducing pain, it is said to help ease tension and stress.

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