



MindfulLiving™ Module 5

Pain-Free Living

Chapter 12 - Resources: Reading

Lower Back Ache? Be Active and Wait It Out, New Guidelines Say

By Gina Kolata

Dr. James Weinstein, a back pain specialist and chief executive of Dartmouth-Hitchcock Health System, offers straightforward advice for managing lower back pain: “Stay active and wait it out.” This guidance is echoed in the updated recommendations recently published by the American College of Physicians. These new guidelines mark a significant shift from previous recommendations that prioritised medication as the first line of treatment.

Dr Nitin Damle, president of the group’s board of regents and a practising internist, emphasises the change: “We need to look at nonpharmacological therapies first,” he says. This adjustment reflects a broader move to address the opioid epidemic, which often begins with prescriptions for conditions like back pain. Many states have enacted measures to limit prescription painkillers, prompting doctors to reconsider their prescribing practices.

The updated guidelines advise against the initial use of opioid painkillers for back pain. Instead, they recommend alternative therapies such as exercise, acupuncture, massage therapy, and yoga. The guidelines also indicate that steroid injections and acetaminophen (like Tylenol) are not effective for back pain relief. While other over-the-counter pain relievers like aspirin, naproxen, or ibuprofen may offer some relief, they should not be the first treatment option.

Dr Weinstein, who was not involved in drafting the guidelines, highlights the importance of staying active and accepting that back pain often resolves independently. “Back pain has a natural course that does not require intervention,” he explains.

For acute back pain, defined as lasting four weeks or less without radiating down the leg, seeing a doctor may not be necessary, according to Dr. Rick Deyo, a spine researcher and professor at Oregon Health and Science University. He compares acute back pain to the common cold: “It’s widespread and annoying but usually not serious.”



Even for chronic back pain lasting at least 12 weeks, the guidelines suggest starting with nonpharmacological treatments. Over-the-counter options like ibuprofen or aspirin are recommended if patients still seek medication.

According to the guidelines, diagnostic scans like MRIs may be misleading and are generally not helpful for back pain. They can reveal abnormalities that do not correlate with the pain experienced.

Sommer Kleweno Walley, who experienced significant back pain after a fall, illustrates the effectiveness of staying active. After receiving physical therapy and anti-inflammatory medication, her pain subsided within a few months. Dr. Christopher J. Standaert, a spine specialist, advised her to focus on staying active rather than relying on an MRI or additional medication.

Interestingly, studies show that non-medical treatments, including placebos, can be surprisingly effective. Patients who were told they were receiving a placebo, along with their usual treatment, reported less pain and disability compared to those receiving only standard treatment.

Dr. Standaert emphasises the importance of setting goals and returning to normal activities. "Patients need to believe their life can improve and they can achieve a better state," he says.



While the new guidelines aim to promote effective back pain management, they face challenges. Dr. Steven J. Atlas, a back pain specialist, notes that patients often seek a cure rather than pain management. Additionally, the healthcare system's focus on medications and diagnostic procedures, combined with insurance limitations on treatments like mindfulness training, complicates the adoption of these guidelines.

Dr Weinstein advocates for reducing the medicalisation of symptoms and encourages a return to regular activities: "Instead of taking a pill, go run, be active."

Adapted by Shery Clein, MindfulLiving™ Coach
Cultivating Awareness Intelligence

Thank you for your dedication and participation. Our goal is to help you navigate and transform discomfort into a space of clarity and growth. Enjoy the journey, stay relaxed, and feel free to reach out for support if you are struggling with issues related to this content.

Blessings and best wishes for your continued well-being 💖

Love, Shery

