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Musculoskeletal

Risk of recurrence of low back pain

How many people with a recent episode of low back pain with experience a recurrence within one year?

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When looking for factors that predict the future recurrence of a past health outcome, many studies are done poorly. Ideally, studies that seek to identify such predictive factors should enrol participants at a consistent point in the inception of their disease.

For example, in a prognostic cohort study looking at recurrence of low back pain, participants could be enrolled at the end of their first episode of back pain and followed to see when their next episode of low back pain occurs. The same study could also identify factors that predict the likelihood of recurrence of the low back pain.

That is exactly the method used by a group of physiotherapists in Sydney. They enrolled 250 patients who had recovered from an episode of low back pain within the last month.

The primary outcome was days to recurrence of an episode of low back pain. Secondary outcomes were: days to recurrence of low back pain severe enough to limit activity moderately, and days to recurrence of low back pain for which healthcare was sought.

Within the 12-month follow-up period, 69% (95%CI: 62-74) of participants had a recurrence of an episode of low back pain, 40% (95%CI: 33-46) had a recurrence of activity-limiting low back pain, and 41% (95%CI: 34-46) had a recurrence of low back pain for which healthcare was sought. The median time to recurrence of an episode of low back pain was 139 days (95%CI: 105-173).

Frequent exposure to awkward postures, longer time sitting (>5 hrs. p/ day), and more than two previous episodes were predictive of recurrence of an episode of low back pain within 12 months.

Recurrence of low back pain is therefore very common, with more than two-thirds of individuals having a recurrence within 12 months after recovery.

Prognostic factors for a recurrence include exposure to awkward posture, longer time sitting, and more than two previous episodes.

Want to read deeper into this topic? Have a look at the free full text version of this article published in Journal of Physiotherapy!