

Finally, Some Good News About Back Pain

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Back pain is a huge problem with 80% of people in the US experiencing back pain at least once during their lifetime. It is the single biggest cause for disability, the third most common reason for doctor visits, and one of the most common reasons for missing work.

It's also expensive. Back and neck pain makes up the biggest healthcare expense in the US, totaling \$134 billion spent in 2016. The next two most expensive conditions are diabetes — \$111 billion in spending — and ischemic heart disease at \$89 billion.

Current evidence based recommendations include starting with activity modification and active treatments like physical therapy. Research shows better outcomes and lower costs with early physical therapy. Unfortunately, only 2% of people with back pain start with physical therapy, and only 7% get to physical therapy within 90 days.

A new pilot program being rolled out by TRICARE, the insurance system used throughout the US military is waiving the payment owed by the patient for up to three PT sessions in an attempt to improve the use of what the Defense Health Agency calls "high value" treatment for low back pain. The theory is that once a person sees some benefit from PT treatment, they're likely to go back for more. But TRICARE found that higher co-pays could be a barrier to people trying that first visit. For the group of patients with the highest co-pays in the system, only 38% of the people prescribed PT attended the first visit. That's about half the rate of attendance found in the lowest co-pay group.

The fact that such a major insurer is looking into the value of PT is great news for everyone. If TRICARE can show that lowering the cost of PT for patients can improve outcomes and save insurance companies money, other major insurers will likely follow. This could improve the lives of millions of people every year while reducing the huge cost of treating low back pain. If you have further questions about treating back pain, your physical therapist is a great person to ask!