

Back pain the norm for young Perth rowers

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The researchers hypothesise that using better posture could reduce or prevent LBP in rowers. Credit: Wellington College

Rowers as young as 14 in WA high schools are developing chronic lower back pain because of poor posture and technique that puts too much strain on their back, research suggests.

Almost all 365 rowers aged 14 to 16 surveyed by researchers at Curtin University's School of Physiotherapy had at some point experienced non-specific lower back [pain](#) (LBP) and more than half were in pain when surveyed.

Boys were in less pain on average at about a 4.1 on the 10-point visual analogue scale (VAS) compared to girls' five, with training exacerbating the pain of about two thirds of participants—some to the point where

they could no longer compete or train with their teams.

Lead researcher and Curtin University PhD candidate Leo Ng says the main cause of LBP in these rowers was their posture both in and out of the boat.

"We found two patterns of rowing styles that can cause back pain," he says.

"Some people are just not bending their back and we think that's why they're getting back pain, and by changing that and getting them to move they seem to reduce it.

"There are also some who bend too far. These had slightly different treatments."

His team investigated cognitive functional therapy (CFT) as a treatment for LBP in a study of 36 rowers aged 14 to 19 on high school and community teams in WA with a VAS score of at least three.

The eight-week treatment included educating the patient about the causes of their pain, and exercises and movement modification to train patients to adopt better posture and movement while rowing, as well as back muscle and lower limb endurance training.

"They think if they have back pain they should keep their back straight while rowing, so they end up stuck in that position—we're saying it's okay to bend their back," Mr Ng says.

They found the 19 rowers in the intervention group had much lower pain intensity levels during ergometer trials and a slower increase in pain than the control group.

A case study of one of the worst effected rowers found CFT treatment reduced his ergometer pain levels from four at start and seven at finish to between zero and one for the duration.

It also reduced his disability from very high to almost normal to the point where he was able to resume competition.

Mr Ng says the researchers hypothesise that using better [posture](#) could reduce or prevent LBP in rowers but this is hard to assess as "we struggle to find rowers without pain to do research on".

Provided by Science Network WA

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