

Physician empathy inversely linked to patients' back pain intensity, HRQOL

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For patients with chronic low back pain, physician empathy is inversely associated with pain intensity, back-related disability, and health-related quality of life (HRQOL) measures, according to a study published online April 11 in *JAMA Network Open*.

John C. Licciardone, D.O., from the University of North Texas Health Science Center at Fort Worth, and colleagues measured the association of physician empathy with pain, function, and HRQOL among patients with [chronic low back pain](#). Data were included for 1,470 patients who completed 5,943 encounters.

The researchers found that greater physician empathy was inversely associated with pain intensity, back-related disability, and HRQOL deficits on each measure. Correspondingly, the very empathetic physician group reported lower mean pain intensity, less mean back-related disability, and fewer HRQOL deficits on each measure compared with the slightly empathetic physician group.

All physician empathy group differences were clinically relevant, with Cohen *d* statistics varying from 0.21 to 0.30 for [pain intensity](#) and for back-related disability, fatigue, and pain interference. More [favorable outcomes](#) were seen in association with physician empathy compared with nonpharmacological treatments, opioid therapy, and lumbar spine surgery.

"Physician empathy is an important aspect of the patient-physician relationship among those with chronic pain," the authors write. "Greater efforts to cultivate and improve physician empathy appear warranted in this population."

More information: John C. Licciardone et al, Physician Empathy and Chronic Pain Outcomes, *JAMA Network Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.6026](#)

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