

Walking brings huge benefits for low back pain, study finds

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Adults with a history of low back pain went nearly twice as long without a recurrence of their back pain if they walked regularly, a new study has found. The work [appears](#) in *The Lancet*.

About four million Australians and 800 million people worldwide have low back pain, and it is a leading cause of disability and reduced quality of life. Repeated episodes of low back pain are also very common, with seven in 10 people who recover from an episode going on to have a recurrence within a year.

Current best practice for back pain management and prevention suggests the combination of [exercise](#) and education. However, some forms of exercise are not accessible or affordable to many people due to their high cost, complexity, and need for supervision.

A clinical trial by Macquarie University's Spinal Pain Research Group has looked at whether walking could be an effective, cost-effective and accessible intervention. The trial followed 701 adults who had recently recovered from an episode of low back pain, randomly allocating participants to either an individualized walking program and six physiotherapist-guided education sessions over six months, or to a control group.

Researchers followed the participants for between one and three years, depending on when they joined.

The paper's senior author, Macquarie University Professor of Physiotherapy, Mark Hancock, says the findings could have a profound impact on how low back pain is managed.

"The [intervention group](#) had fewer occurrences of activity limiting pain

compared to the control group, and a longer average period before they had a recurrence, with a median of 208 days compared to 112 days," Professor Hancock says. "Walking is a low-cost, widely accessible and simple exercise that almost anyone can engage in, regardless of [geographic location](#), age or socioeconomic status.

"We don't know exactly why walking is so good for preventing back pain, but it is likely to include the combination of the gentle oscillatory movements, loading and strengthening the spinal structures and muscles, relaxation and stress relief, and release of 'feel-good' endorphins. And of course, we also know that walking comes with many other health benefits, including cardiovascular health, bone density, healthy weight, and improved [mental health](#)."

Lead author Dr. Natasha Pocovi says in addition to providing participants with longer pain-free periods, the program was very cost-effective.

"It not only improved people's quality of life, but it reduced their need both to seek health care support and the amount of time taken off work by approximately half," she says.

"The exercise-based interventions to prevent back pain that have been explored previously are typically group-based and need close clinical supervision and expensive equipment, so they are much less accessible to the majority of patients. Our study has shown that this effective and accessible means of exercise has the potential to be successfully implemented at a much larger scale than other forms of exercise."

To build on these findings, the team now hopes to explore how they can integrate the preventive approach into the routine care of patients who experience recurrent [low back pain](#).

More information: *The Lancet* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736\(24\)00755-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(24)00755-4). [www.thelancet.com/journals/lan ...](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lan...)
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