



Low back pain: Promoting wise healthcare

Healthcare is often described as ‘high value’ or ‘low value’¹. Both are important to know about so you can get the right care, not care that is risky or has little benefit.

High value care is	Low value care is
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ <i>Effective</i> – evidence suggests that it works to produce a positive effect ✓ <i>Safe</i> – there is low risk of harm ✓ <i>Cost effective</i> – despite cost, the care provides benefit relative to alternative options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ <i>Ineffective</i> – evidence suggests that the care will provide no or very little benefit ✗ <i>Potentially harmful</i> – the risk of harm is greater than any likely benefit ✗ <i>Not cost effective</i> – since the care is unlikely to provide benefit, the cost associated with care delivery could be used on other care options

High value care for low back pain:

- ✓ A diagnosis of low back pain that is based on a thorough clinical assessment, rather than on x-rays, scans (CT/MRI) or other tests. Scans for 90-95% of people do NOT improve clinical outcomes. Only cases with ‘specific’ pathology (< 1% and ~5% with nerve compression), may require a scan.
- ✓ A personalised management plan made with you that focuses on:
 - Accurate education about your back pain that fosters a positive mindset (most back pain improves; pain does not get worse as you age; it is important to learn how to relax and move your spine)
 - How to stay active, safely exercise and increase your physical activity and movement using a paced approach (not too much/not too little), how often and how much (“dose”), and how to manage if pain increases
 - Learning helpful ways to cope with pain and help manage distress and worry, as these factors can contribute to pain flares ups
 - Helping you achieve the things you want to do (at home, at work, at school)
 - Promoting helpful habits (good sleep, social activities, working or studying)
 - Weight loss support for people who are overweight or obese

¹ Scott IA, Duckett SJ In search of professional consensus in defining and reducing low-value care Med J Aust 2015; 203 (4): 179-181. || doi: 10.5694/mja14.01664



Low value care for back pain:

- ✗ Relying on medications and other passive treatments (things being done to you)
- ✗ Use of opioid medications (these have a significant risk of harm)
- ✗ Manipulation, manual therapy, massage, acupuncture should only be considered as an adjunct to education, exercise and lifestyle changes, as evidence shows short term pain relief only
- ✗ Do NOT offer other treatments that do not have evidence of benefit. For low back pain (with or without sciatica), this includes:
 - Bed rest
 - Corsets, belts, traction
 - TENS, PENS, interferential, ultrasound
 - Injection procedures should only be considered as an adjunct to education, exercise and lifestyle changes, as evidence shows short term pain relief only
 - Spinal fusion / disc replacements, as evidence shows long term outcomes are similar to a structured exercise program. These surgeries are expensive and come with significant risk of harm

Important questions to ask your health professional

Here are [5 important questions](#) (available in 12 different languages) from the [Choosing Wisely](#) initiative. These are the recommended questions that you should ask your health professional about your low back pain to help you decide what the right care is for you.

5 important question to ask your health professional(s)

1. Do I really need this test, treatment or procedure?
2. What are the risks?
3. Are there simpler, safer options?
4. What happens if I don't do anything?
5. What are the costs?