Natural course of nonspecific low back pain: A systematic review of prospective cohort studies

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**Abstract**

Nonspecific low back pain is a relatively common and recurrent condition for which at present there is no effective cure. In current guidelines the prognosis of acute nonspecific back pain is assumed to be favourable but this assumption is mainly based on return to function. This systematic review investigates the natural course of pain in patients with nonspecific acute low back pain.

Included were prospective studies of the prognosis of patients with defined onset of back pain for less than 3 months duration and a follow-up of at least 12 months, set in primary care. Proportions of patients still reporting pain during follow-up were pooled using a random-effects model. Subgroup analyses were used to identify sources of variation between the results of individual studies.

A total of 11 studies were eligible for evaluation. In the first 3 months recovery is observed in 33% of patients, but one year after onset 65% still report pain. Subgroup analysis reveals that the pooled proportion of patients still reporting pain after one year for studies which considered total absence of pain as a criterion for recovery was 71% at 12 months versus 57% for studies which used a less stringent definition. The pooled proportion for Australian studies was 41% versus 69% for European or USA studies.

The findings of this review indicate that the assumption that spontaneous recovery occurs in a large majority of patients is not justified. There should be more focus on intensive follow-up of patient who have not recovered within the first three months.

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