

Issue date: May 2009

Low back pain

Early management of persistent non-specific low back pain

NICE clinical guideline 88

Low back pain

Ordering information

You can download the following documents from www.nice.org.uk/CG88

- The NICE guideline (this document) – all the recommendations.
- A quick reference guide – a summary of the recommendations for healthcare professionals.
- ‘Understanding NICE guidance’ – a summary for patients and carers.
- The full guideline – all the recommendations, details of how they were developed, and reviews of the evidence they were based on.

For printed copies of the quick reference guide or ‘Understanding NICE guidance’, phone NICE publications on 0845 003 7783 or email publications@nice.org.uk and quote:

- N1865 (quick reference guide)
- N1866 (‘Understanding NICE guidance’).

NICE clinical guidelines are recommendations about the treatment and care of people with specific diseases and conditions in the NHS in England and Wales.

This guidance represents the view of NICE, which was arrived at after careful consideration of the evidence available. Healthcare professionals are expected to take it fully into account when exercising their clinical judgement. However, the guidance does not override the individual responsibility of healthcare professionals to make decisions appropriate to the circumstances of the individual patient, in consultation with the patient and/or guardian or carer, and informed by the summary of product characteristics of any drugs they are considering.

Implementation of this guidance is the responsibility of local commissioners and/or providers. Commissioners and providers are reminded that it is their responsibility to implement the guidance, in their local context, in light of their duties to avoid unlawful discrimination and to have regard to promoting equality of opportunity. Nothing in this guidance should be interpreted in a way that would be inconsistent with compliance with those duties.

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence

MidCity Place
71 High Holborn
London WC1V 6NA

www.nice.org.uk

© National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2009. All rights reserved. This material may be freely reproduced for educational and not-for-profit purposes. No reproduction by or for commercial organisations, or for commercial purposes, is allowed without the express written permission of NICE.

Contents

Introduction	4
Patient-centred care.....	6
Key priorities for implementation.....	7
1 Guidance	9
1.1 Assessment and imaging.....	9
1.2 Information, education and patient preferences.....	9
1.3 Physical activity and exercise	10
1.4 Manual therapy	11
1.5 Other non-pharmacological therapies	11
1.6 Invasive procedures.....	12
1.7 Combined physical and psychological treatment programme.....	12
1.8 Pharmacological therapies.....	12
1.9 Referral for surgery.....	14
2 Notes on the scope of the guidance	15
3 Implementation.....	15
4 Research recommendations.....	16
4.1 Screening protocols	16
4.2 Delivery of patient education.....	17
4.3 Use of sequential therapies	17
4.4 Psychological treatments.....	18
4.5 Invasive procedures.....	19
5 Other versions of this guideline	20
5.1 Full guideline.....	20
5.2 Quick reference guide.....	20
5.3 ‘Understanding NICE guidance’	20
6 Related NICE guidance.....	21
7 Updating the guideline.....	21
Appendix A: The Guideline Development Group	22
Appendix B: The Guideline Review Panel	24
Appendix C: The algorithm	25

Introduction

This guideline covers the early treatment and management of persistent or recurrent low back pain, defined as non-specific low back pain that has lasted for more than 6 weeks, but for less than 12 months. It does not address the management of severe disabling low back pain that has lasted over 12 months.

Non-specific low back pain is tension, soreness and/or stiffness in the lower back region for which it is not possible to identify a specific cause of the pain. Several structures in the back, including the joints, discs and connective tissues, may contribute to symptoms.

The lower back is commonly defined as the area between the bottom of the rib cage and the buttock creases. Some people with non-specific low back pain may also feel pain in their upper legs, but the low back pain usually predominates.

A clinician who suspects that there is a specific cause for their patient's low back pain (see box 1) should arrange the relevant investigations. However, the diagnosis of specific causes of low back pain is beyond the remit of this guideline.

Box 1 Specific causes of low back pain (not covered in this guideline)

Malignancy
Infection
Fracture
Ankylosing spondylitis and other inflammatory disorders

The management of the following conditions is not covered by this guideline:

- radicular pain resulting from nerve root compression
- cauda equina syndrome (this should be treated as a surgical emergency requiring immediate referral).

