Complete Summary

GUIDELINE TITLE

Primary care interventions to prevent low back pain in adults: recommendation statement.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC SOURCE(S)

U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF). Primary care interventions to prevent low back pain in adults: recommendation statement. Rockville (MD): Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ); 2004 Feb. 4 p. [3 references]

US Preventive Services Task Force. Primary care interventions to prevent low back pain in adults: recommendation statement. Am Fam Physician 2005 Jun 15;71(12):2337-8. [3 references] PubMed

GUIDELINE STATUS

This is the current release of the guideline.

This release updates a previously published guideline: U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. Guide to clinical preventive services. 2nd ed. Baltimore (MD): Williams & Wilkins; 1996. Chapter 60, Counseling to prevent low back pain. p. 699-710.

COMPLETE SUMMARY CONTENT

SCOPE
METHODOLOGY - including Rating Scheme and Cost Analysis
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SCOPE

DISEASE/CONDITION(S)

Low back pain

GUIDELINE CATEGORY

Prevention

CLINICAL SPECIALTY

Family Practice
Internal Medicine
Orthopedic Surgery
Preventive Medicine

INTENDED USERS

Advanced Practice Nurses
Allied Health Personnel
Nurses
Physician Assistants
Physicians

GUIDELINE OBJECTIVE(S)

- To summarize the current U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommendations for the prevention of low back pain and the supporting scientific evidence
- To update the 1996 recommendations contained in the *Guide to Clinical Preventive Services*, Second Edition

TARGET POPULATION

Adults with low back pain seen in primary care settings

INTERVENTIONS AND PRACTICES CONSIDERED

Interventions considered but not specifically recommended:

1. Back flexion, back extension, and general fitness exercises
2. Back mechanic and ergonomic techniques
3. Mechanical back supports
4. Risk factor modification
5. Education

MAJOR OUTCOMES CONSIDERED

Key Question 1: (Overarching) Do exercises aimed at strengthening low back muscles prevent low back pain in individuals compared with no exercise?

Key Question 2: Do educational programs (i.e., back schools) help to prevent low back pain?

Key Question 3: Is there evidence to show that the use of lumbar supports (back belts) may increase the risk for low back pain (harm) or help prevent back injuries (benefit)?

Key Question 4: Is there new evidence that supports risk factor modification as a method to help prevent low back pain?

METHODOLOGY

METHODS USED TO COLLECT/SELECT EVIDENCE

Searches of Electronic Databases

DESCRIPTION OF METHODS USED TO COLLECT/SELECT THE EVIDENCE

The search strategy for this brief update included a review of articles published in MEDLINE®, the Cochrane Library, and the National Guideline Clearinghouse™ between 1994 and 2001. The search was limited to the English language and Abridged Index Medicus® publications.

The guideline developers searched for randomized controlled trials (RCTs), meta-analyses, systematic reviews, editorials, and commentaries addressing the key questions.

The guideline developers used the search terms low back pain, then focused on prevention and control, and used randomized controlled trials as Medical Subject Heading® (MeSH®) terms. Exercise, education, back, school, and risk factors were also used as free-text search terms. The search yielded 324 articles that were related to low back pain prevention and control. Four of these were RCTs published in English, one of which had been evaluated in the previous USPSTF review. Of the three remaining RCTs, only one directly addressed injury prevention.

Studies were excluded if they did not meet the specific inclusion criteria listed or if they were not generalizable to the adult population in the United States.

The one RCT meeting inclusion criteria found that neither lumbar supports nor education, alone or in combination, reduced low back pain incidence or sick leave. No new RCTs were found that demonstrated that exercise or physical activity can help prevent low back pain. Two experts reviewed these findings for comprehensiveness and provided no additional evidence.

NUMBER OF SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Key Question 1 = 0 studies
Key Question 2 = 3 studies
Key Question 3 = 2 studies
Key Question 4 = 0 studies

METHODS USED TO ASSESS THE QUALITY AND STRENGTH OF THE EVIDENCE

Weighting According to a Rating Scheme (Scheme Given)

RATING SCHEME FOR THE STRENGTH OF THE EVIDENCE

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) grades the quality of the overall evidence for a service on a 3-point scale (good, fair, poor):

Good

Evidence includes consistent results from well-designed, well-conducted studies in representative populations that directly assess effects on health outcomes.

Fair

Evidence is sufficient to determine effects on health outcomes, but the strength of the evidence is limited by the number, quality, or consistency of the individual studies, generalizability to routine practice, or indirect nature of the evidence on health outcomes.

Poor

Evidence is insufficient to assess the effects on health outcomes because of limited number or power of studies, important flaws in their design or conduct, gaps in the chain of evidence, or lack of information on important health outcomes.

METHODS USED TO ANALYZE THE EVIDENCE

Systematic Review

DESCRIPTION OF THE METHODS USED TO ANALYZE THE EVIDENCE

Not stated

METHODS USED TO FORMULATE THE RECOMMENDATIONS

Balance Sheets
Expert Consensus

DESCRIPTION OF METHODS USED TO FORMULATE THE RECOMMENDATIONS

When the overall quality of the evidence is judged to be good or fair, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) proceeds to consider the magnitude of net benefit to be expected from implementation of the preventive service. Determining net benefit requires assessing both the magnitude of benefits and the magnitude of harms and weighing the two.

The USPSTF classifies benefits, harms, and net benefits on a 4-point scale: "substantial," "moderate," "small," and "zero/negative."

"Outcomes tables" (similar to 'balance sheets') are the USPSTF's standard resource for estimating the magnitude of benefit. These tables, prepared by the topic teams for use at USPSTF meetings, compare the condition specific outcomes expected for a hypothetical primary care population with and without use of the preventive service. These comparisons may be extended to consider only people of specified age or risk groups or other aspects of implementation. Thus, outcomes tables allow the USPSTF to examine directly how the preventive services affect benefits for various groups.

When evidence on harms is available, the topic teams assess its quality in a manner like that for benefits and include adverse events in the outcomes tables. When few harms data are available, the USPSTF does not assume that harms are small or nonexistent. It recognizes a responsibility to consider which harms are likely and judge their potential frequency and the severity that might ensue from implementing the service. It uses whatever evidence exists to construct a general confidence interval on the 4-point scale (e.g., substantial, moderate, small, and zero/negative).

Value judgments are involved in using the information in an outcomes table to rate either benefits or harms on the USPSTF's 4-point scale. Value judgments are also needed to weigh benefits against harms to arrive at a rating of net benefit.

In making its determinations of net benefit, the USPSTF strives to consider what it believes are the general values of most people. It does this with greater confidence for certain outcomes (e.g., death) about which there is little disagreement about undesirability, but it recognizes that the degree of risk people are willing to accept to avert other outcomes (e.g., cataracts) can vary considerably. When the USPSTF perceives that preferences among individuals vary greatly, and that these variations are sufficient to make a trade-off of benefits and harms a "close-call," then it will often assign a C recommendation (see the "Recommendation Rating Scheme" field). This recommendation indicates the decision is likely to be sensitive to individual patient preferences.

The USPSTF uses its assessment of the evidence and magnitude of net benefit to make recommendations. The general principles the USPSTF follows in making recommendations are outlined in Table 5 of the companion document cited below. The USPSTF liaisons on the topic team compose the first drafts of the recommendations and rationale statements, which the full panel then reviews and edits. Recommendations are based on formal voting procedures that include explicit rules for determining the views of the majority.

From: Harris RP, Helfand M, Woolf SH, Lohr KN, Mulrow, CD, Teutsch SM, Atkins D. Current methods of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force: a review of the process. Methods Work Group, Third U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. Am J Prev Med 2001 Apr;20(3S):21-35.

RATING SCHEME FOR THE STRENGTH OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) grades its recommendations according to one of five classifications (A, B, C, D, I) reflecting the strength of evidence and magnitude of net benefit (benefits minus harms):

A

The USPSTF strongly recommends that clinicians provide [the service] to eligible patients. The USPSTF found good evidence that [the service] improves important health outcomes and concludes that benefits substantially outweigh harms.

B

The USPSTF recommends that clinicians provide [the service] to eligible patients. The USPSTF found at least fair evidence that [the service] improves important health outcomes and concludes that benefits outweigh harms.

C

The USPSTF makes no recommendation for or against routine provision of [the service]. The USPSTF found at least fair evidence that [the service] can improve health outcomes but concludes that the balance of benefits and harms is too close to justify a general recommendation.

D

The USPSTF recommends against routinely providing [the service] to asymptomatic patients. The USPSTF found at least fair evidence that [the service] is ineffective or that harms outweigh benefits.

I

The USPSTF concludes that the evidence is insufficient to recommend for or against routinely providing [the service]. Evidence that [the service] is effective is lacking, of poor quality, or conflicting and the balance of benefits and harms cannot be determined.

COST ANALYSIS

A formal cost analysis was not performed and published cost analyses were not reviewed.

METHOD OF GUIDELINE VALIDATION

Comparison with Guidelines from Other Groups
External Peer Review
Internal Peer Review

DESCRIPTION OF METHOD OF GUIDELINE VALIDATION

Peer Review. Before the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) makes its final determinations about recommendations on a given preventive service, the Evidence-based Practice Center (EPC) and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) send a draft systematic evidence review to 4 to 6 external experts and to federal agencies and professional and disease-based health organizations with interests in the topic. They ask the experts to examine the

review critically for accuracy and completeness and to respond to a series of specific questions about the document. After assembling these external review comments and documenting the proposed response to key comments, the topic team presents this information to the Task Force in memo form. In this way, the Task Force can consider these external comments and a final version of the systematic review before it votes on its recommendations about the service. Draft recommendations are then circulated for comment from reviewers representing professional societies, voluntary organizations, and federal agencies. These comments are discussed before the whole U.S. Preventive Services Task Force before final recommendations are confirmed.

Recommendations of Others. Recommendations regarding the prevention of low back pain were considered from the following groups: the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

RECOMMENDATIONS

MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) grades its recommendations (A, B, C, D, or I) and the quality of the overall evidence for a service (good, fair, poor). The definitions of these grades can be found at the end of the "Major Recommendations" field.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) concludes that the evidence is insufficient to recommend for or against the routine use of interventions to prevent low back pain in adults in primary care settings. **I Recommendation.**

The USPSTF found no new good evidence for or against the use of back strengthening exercises or risk factor modification (e.g., increased physical activity, smoking cessation, or reduced alcohol consumption) for the primary prevention of low back pain in adults. There is limited evidence that educational sessions in occupational settings (e.g., back schools) produce modest short-term benefits in adults with recurrent or chronic low back pain, but no evidence that such education prevents back pain in healthy individuals or those at risk for back pain. Some interventions, such as mechanical supports, may increase the risk for low back pain. As a result, the USPSTF could not determine the balance between benefits and harms of the different interventions that may be used to prevent low back pain.

Clinical Considerations

- Although exercise has not been shown to prevent low back pain, regular physical activity has other proven health benefits, including prevention of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, obesity, and osteoporosis.
- Neither lumbar supports nor back belts appear to be effective in reducing the incidence of low back pain.

- Worksite interventions, including educational interventions, have some short-term benefit in reducing the incidence of low back pain. However, their applicability to the primary care setting is unknown.
- Back schools may prevent further back injury for individuals with recurrent or chronic low back pain, but their long-term effectiveness has not been well studied.

Definitions:

Strength of Recommendations

The USPSTF grades its recommendations according to one of five classifications (A, B, C, D, I) reflecting the strength of evidence and magnitude of net benefit (benefits minus harms):

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B

The USPSTF recommends that clinicians provide [the service] to eligible patients. The USPSTF found at least fair evidence that [the service] improves important health outcomes and concludes that benefits outweigh harms.

C

The USPSTF makes no recommendation for or against routine provision of [the service]. The USPSTF found at least fair evidence that [the service] can improve health outcomes but concludes that the balance of benefits and harms is too close to justify a general recommendation.

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The USPSTF recommends against routinely providing [the service] to asymptomatic patients. The USPSTF found at least fair evidence that [the service] is ineffective or that harms outweigh benefits.

I

The USPSTF concludes that the evidence is insufficient to recommend for or against routinely providing [the service]. Evidence that [the service] is effective is lacking, of poor quality, or conflicting and the balance of benefits and harms cannot be determined.

Strength of Evidence

The USPSTF grades the quality of the overall evidence for a service on a 3-point scale (good, fair, poor):

Good

Evidence includes consistent results from well-designed, well-conducted studies in representative populations that directly assess effects on health outcomes.

Fair

Evidence is sufficient to determine effects on health outcomes, but the strength of the evidence is limited by the number, quality, or consistency of the individual studies, generalizability to routine practice, or indirect nature of the evidence on health outcomes.

Poor

Evidence is insufficient to assess the effects on health outcomes because of limited number or power of studies, important flaws in their design or conduct, gaps in the chain of evidence, or lack of information on important health outcomes.

CLINICAL ALGORITHM(S)

None provided

EVIDENCE SUPPORTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS

TYPE OF EVIDENCE SUPPORTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The type of evidence supporting the recommendations is identified in the "Major Recommendations" field.

BENEFITS/HARMS OF IMPLEMENTING THE GUIDELINE RECOMMENDATIONS

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) found no new good evidence for or against the use of back strengthening exercises or risk factor modification (e.g., increased physical activity, smoking cessation, or reduced alcohol consumption) for the primary prevention of low back pain in adults. There is limited evidence that educational sessions in occupational settings (e.g., back schools) produce modest short-term benefits in adults with recurrent or chronic low back pain, but no evidence that such education prevents back pain in healthy individuals or those at risk for back pain. Some interventions, such as mechanical supports, may increase the risk for low back pain. As a result, the USPSTF could not determine the balance between benefits and harms of the different interventions that may be used to prevent low back pain.

POTENTIAL HARMS

Some interventions, such as mechanical supports, may increase the risk for low back pain. As a result, the USPSTF could not determine the balance between

benefits and harms of the different interventions that may be used to prevent low back pain.

QUALIFYING STATEMENTS

QUALIFYING STATEMENTS

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommendations are independent of the U.S. government. They should not be construed as an official position of Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GUIDELINE

DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

The experiences of the first and second U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF), as well as that of other evidence-based guideline efforts, have highlighted the importance of identifying effective ways to implement clinical recommendations. Practice guidelines are relatively weak tools for changing clinical practice when used in isolation. To effect change, guidelines must be coupled with strategies to improve their acceptance and feasibility. Such strategies include enlisting the support of local opinion leaders, using reminder systems for clinicians and patients, adopting standing orders, and audit and feedback of information to clinicians about their compliance with recommended practice.

In the case of preventive services guidelines, implementation needs to go beyond traditional dissemination and promotion efforts to recognize the added patient and clinician barriers that affect preventive care. These include clinicians' ambivalence about whether preventive medicine is part of their job, the psychological and practical challenges that patients face in changing behaviors, lack of access to health care or of insurance coverage for preventive services for some patients, competing pressures within the context of shorter office visits, and the lack of organized systems in most practices to ensure the delivery of recommended preventive care.

Dissemination strategies have changed dramatically in this age of electronic information. While recognizing the continuing value of journals and other print formats for dissemination, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality will make all U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) products available through its Web site. The combination of electronic access and extensive material in the public domain should make it easier for a broad audience of users to access U.S. Preventive Services Task Force materials and adapt them for their local needs. Online access to U.S. Preventive Services Task Force products also opens up new possibilities for the appearance of the annual, pocket-size *Guide to Clinical Preventive Services*.

To be successful, approaches for implementing prevention have to be tailored to the local level and deal with the specific barriers at a given site, typically requiring the redesign of systems of care. Such a systems approach to prevention has had

notable success in established staff-model health maintenance organizations, by addressing organization of care, emphasizing a philosophy of prevention, and altering the training and incentives for clinicians. Staff-model plans also benefit from integrated information systems that can track the use of needed services and generate automatic reminders aimed at patients and clinicians, some of the most consistently successful interventions. Information systems remain a major challenge for individual clinicians' offices, however, as well as for looser affiliations of practices in network-model managed care and independent practice associations, where data on patient visits, referrals, and test results are not always centralized.

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

Foreign Language Translations
Patient Resources
Pocket Guide/Reference Cards

For information about availability, see the "Availability of Companion Documents" and "Patient Resources" fields below.

INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE (IOM) NATIONAL HEALTHCARE QUALITY REPORT CATEGORIES

IOM CARE NEED

Staying Healthy

IOM DOMAIN

Effectiveness
Patient-centeredness

IDENTIFYING INFORMATION AND AVAILABILITY

BIBLIOGRAPHIC SOURCE(S)

U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF). Primary care interventions to prevent low back pain in adults: recommendation statement. Rockville (MD): Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ); 2004 Feb. 4 p. [3 references]

US Preventive Services Task Force. Primary care interventions to prevent low back pain in adults: recommendation statement. Am Fam Physician 2005 Jun 15;71(12):2337-8. [3 references] PubMed

ADAPTATION

Not applicable: The guideline was not adapted from another source.

DATE RELEASED

1996 (revised 2004 Feb 24)

GUIDELINE DEVELOPER(S)

United States Preventive Services Task Force - Independent Expert Panel

GUIDELINE DEVELOPER COMMENT

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) is a federally-appointed panel of independent experts. Conclusions of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force do not necessarily reflect policy of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) or its agencies.

SOURCE(S) OF FUNDING

United States Government

GUIDELINE COMMITTEE

U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF)

COMPOSITION OF GROUP THAT AUTHORED THE GUIDELINE

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**Member of the USPSTF at the time this recommendation was finalized.* For a list of current Task Force members, go to www.ahrq.gov/clinic/uspstfab.htm.

FINANCIAL DISCLOSURES/CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) has an explicit policy concerning conflict of interest. All members and Evidence-based Practice Center (EPC) staff disclose at each meeting if they have an important financial conflict for each topic being discussed. Task Force members and EPC staff with conflicts can participate in discussions about evidence, but members abstain from voting on recommendations about the topic in question.

From: Harris RP, Helfand M, Woolf SH, Lohr KN, Mulrow, CD, Teutsch SM, Atkins D. Current methods of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force: a review of the process. Methods Work Group, Third U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. Am J Prev Med 2001 Apr;20(3S):21-35.

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GUIDELINE AVAILABILITY

Electronic copies: Available from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) Web site.

Print copies: Available from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) Publications Clearinghouse. For more information, go to http://www.ahrq.gov/news/pubsix.htm or call 1-800-358-9295 (U.S. only).

AVAILABILITY OF COMPANION DOCUMENTS

The following are available:

Evidence Reviews:

- Primary care interventions to prevent low back pain in adults: a brief evidence update for the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. Rockville (MD): Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), 2004 Feb. 5 p.

Electronic copies: Available from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) Web site.

Background Articles:

- Woolf SH, Atkins D. The evolving role of prevention in health care: contributions of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. Am J Prev Med 2001 Apr;20(3S):13-20.
- Harris RP, Helfand M, Woolf SH, Lohr KN, Mulrow, CD, Teutsch SM, Atkins D. Current methods of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force: a review of the process. Methods Work Group, Third U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. Am J Prev Med 2001 Apr;20(3S):21-35.
- Saha S, Hoerger TJ, Pignone MP, Teutsch SM, Helfand M, Mandelblatt JS. The art and science of incorporating cost effectiveness into evidence-based recommendations for clinical preventive services. Cost Work Group of the Third U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. Am J Prev Med 2001 Apr;20(3S):36-43.

Electronic copies: Available from U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) Web site.

The following are also available:

- The guide to clinical preventive services, 2006. Recommendations of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. Rockville (MD): Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), 2006. 228 p. Electronic copies available from the AHRQ Web site.
- A step-by-step guide to delivering clinical preventive services: a systems approach. Rockville (MD): Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), 2002 May. 189 p. Electronic copies available from the AHRQ Web site. See the related QualityTool summary on the Health Care Innovations Exchange Web site.

Print copies: Available from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality Publications Clearinghouse. For more information, go to http://www.ahrq.gov/news/pubsix.htm or call 1-800-358-9295 (U.S. only).

The Electronic Preventive Services Selector (ePSS), available as a PDA application and a web-based tool, is a quick hands-on tool designed to help primary care clinicians identify the screening, counseling, and preventive medication services that are appropriate for their patients. It is based on current recommendations of the USPSTF and can be searched by specific patient characteristics, such as age, sex, and selected behavioral risk factors.

PATIENT RESOURCES

The following is available:

- The pocket guide to good health for adults. Rockville (MD): Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ); 2003.

  Electronic copies: Available from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) Web site. Copies also available in Spanish from the USPSTF Web site. See the related QualityTool summary on the Health Care Innovations Exchange Web site.

Print copies: Available from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) Publications Clearinghouse. For more information, go to http://www.ahrq.gov/news/pubsix.htm or call 1-800-358-9295 (U.S. only).

Please note: This patient information is intended to provide health professionals with information to share with their patients to help them better understand their health and their diagnosed disorders. By providing access to this patient information, it is not the intention of NGC to provide specific medical advice for particular patients. Rather we urge patients and their representatives to review this material and then to consult with a licensed health professional for evaluation of treatment options suitable for them as well as for diagnosis and answers to their personal medical questions. This patient information has been derived and prepared from a guideline for health care professionals included on NGC by the authors or publishers of that original guideline. The patient information is not reviewed by NGC to establish whether or not it accurately reflects the original guideline's content.

NGC STATUS

This summary was completed by ECRI on June 30, 1998. The information was verified by the guideline developer on December 1, 1998. This summary was updated by ECRI on April 8, 2004. The updated information was verified by the guideline developer on April 22, 2004.

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Date Modified: 9/29/2008