

BMJ publishes amazing back–pain trial results

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Pain Relief through Learning

Major Clinical Trial proves Alexander Technique lessons relieves back pain

For over 100 years people from all walks of life have sworn by the Alexander Technique to help rid them of back pain. Now a major clinical trial proves they were right.

The MRC ATEAM randomized controlled trial of Alexander Technique lessons, Exercise and Massage for chronic and recurrent back pain:

Alexander Technique still effective a year after lessons

Alexander Technique, Exercise and Massage (ATEAM) back pain clinical trial results have proven that Alexander Technique lessons gives long-term benefit to chronic back pain sufferers. After one year, the Alexander Technique was still an effective method of pain management and prevention.

Over 500 patients were involved in a multicentre clinical trial funded by the Medical Research Council and the NHS (Research and Development Fund) comparing the benefits of Alexander Technique lessons, GP prescribed exercise and therapeutic massage for chronic or recurrent non-specific back pain. The Medical Research Council funded the trial with £585,000 and the NHS Research and Development Fund contributed an additional £186,000.

Clinical trial details

A full sample of over 570 patients with chronic/recurrent low back pain was recruited from 64 English general practices. They were randomly allocated into four categories consisting of normal care, six massage sessions, six Alexander Technique lessons, or twenty-four Alexander Technique lessons. Half of each group was additionally randomised to a doctor recommended exercise programme with behaviour counselling from practice nurses.

Outcomes were measured using the Roland-Morris score, which records a number of activities impaired by pain and also days in pain. The Roland-Morris score includes daily tasks such as putting on socks or shoes, how far a person can walk with out pain, whether sleep or appetite is disturbed by back pain and difficulties in getting out of a chair.

Successful intervention for back pain

Trial results clearly showed that twenty-four Alexander Technique lessons was the most effective way of relieving back pain over a long period whereas massage was not. Those who had six Alexander Technique lessons followed by exercise prescription achieved 72% of the effect of twenty-four lessons alone. The crucial point here being that the exercises were undertaken after Alexander Technique lessons, when the participant had learned to move in a less stressful way and to avoid excessive tension liable to lead to pain.

“If it weren’t for the Alexander Technique, I would not be living an independent life now, as my back would have prevented this.”

*Female Alexander Technique Pupil
Retired, 63 (STAT Pupil Survey 2006)*

Heads up for the Alexander Technique

More than 90% of participants achieved very good attendance at lessons. Some of those continued to take lessons at their own expense because of the relief from pain and improvement in quality of life. One participant even decided to train as an Alexander Technique Teacher as a result of experiencing the powerful effect of lessons.

Learning to move differently

All trial participants were taught in the same way, by a trained teacher using skilful hand contact to re-educate participants awareness of movement patterns. This involves learning to inhibit, or stop, automatic habits. An example of this is the way a person with back pain attempts to get out of a chair, one of the indicators of pain on the Roland-Morris score. When standing, it’s easy to stiffen the neck and back muscles, dragging the head down and shortening the spine, thus disturbing the balance of the body, particularly of the head. Pain also causes people to stiffen up and avoid sudden movement, one reason why back pain sufferers often walk very slowly. It may take several lessons for an individual to learn how to prevent these automatic interference responses and move differently

Alexander lessons

For sustainable benefit 24 individual lessons lasting 30 – 40 minutes are recommended. People are usually asked to remove shoes but otherwise remain fully clothed.

Scope of application

Back pain and other problems are often exacerbated by occupational habits such as computer use, lessons can include using the body well when typing, doing mouse work and other work related tasks.

The Alexander effect.

During lessons people find they can sit, stand and move with less effort and strain. Afterwards they frequently feel taller, freer and more securely balanced, particularly when walking

“Each year, I was having to take two or three days off work several times in the year when I badly strained my neck/shoulder muscles, resulting in incapacitation. Since starting Alexander Technique lessons, I have experienced very little problem.”

www.stat.org.uk

Information about The Alexander Technique

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Qualified teachers

All STAT qualified teachers undergo a three year approved teacher training course. They carry professional indemnity insurance, agree to abide by a code of conduct and undertake regular continued professional development. STAT keeps a register of qualified teachers who use the initials MSTAT after their name. Contact STAT for a local teacher. www.stat.org.uk