

Family Medicine Clerkship Plain Language Summary Template

Title: The Oswestry Disability Index and back pain

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Plain Language Summary:

Back pain is one of the most common problems family doctors treat. Up to 80% of people experience back pain at least once in their life and it can be caused by many reasons. Some causes of back pain, like muscle strain, go away simply with rest. Other causes of back pain may require physical therapy or even surgery. With so many causes of back pain it's important for the doctor to know as much as possible about each patient's pain. The Oswestry Disability Index is a tool doctors use to help get as much information about each person's back pain as possible.

The ODI is a scored questionnaire that asks patients about how their back pain is affecting their life. It also asks about where and how bad it hurts. Doctors use it as a tool to understand how each individual patient views their back pain. It is also used to help make decisions about how to treat each patient.

The type of treatment depends on what's causing the pain. Some signs of serious back problems include pain shooting from the back down the legs, numbness or tingling in legs and feet, or weakness. A doctor should be seen as soon as possible if any of these are present. Even if a patient doesn't have any of these, a doctor should still be seen if back pain is starting to affect the patient's daily activities.

Several tools exist for doctors to measure back pain in addition to the ODI. Physical tests like flexibility, strength, and even just looking at the back with the naked eye are important. There are ways doctors can see inside the back to look for possible causes if physical tests aren't enough to get a clear answer. None of them are painful. They only require the patient to lie still. A simple x-ray can be very helpful to look at the bones of the back. An MRI or CT scan is used to view the muscles, tendons, and ligaments of the back. The combination of the ODI, physical tests, and images is usually enough for the doctor to figure out what's causing the pain.

Once the problem is found and fixed, the ODI is a great way for doctors to track how the patient is doing. If the ODI scores are improving, then the correct problem was found and the patient is likely getting better. But if the scores are going down or staying the same, the doctor may need to repeat tests or try new ones. This shouldn't be discouraging. Back pain is complicated and may take two or three tries to get the perfect treatment. It's important to be as helpful and honest as possible with the doctor in order to get the right diagnosis quickly.

The ODI has been used in hospitals and clinics for over thirty years. Since that time it has been used in many scientific studies that look at different causes of back pain. It has proved to be an effective and reliable tool at measuring many different types of back pain.

Additional Resources:

Mayo Clinic website about back pain

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/back-pain/DS00171>

Webmd site on back pain

<http://www.webmd.com/back-pain/default.htm>

Key Words:

Oswestry

Back pain

Questionnaire

Diagnosis

Assessment

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