

Referral and Outcomes of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM): Chronic Low Back Pain in Urban and Rural Primary Care

This project gives primary care practitioners (PCPs) in central Kentucky the opportunity to refer their chronic low back pain patients to progressive muscle relaxation or clinical massage therapy at no cost to the patient. We will evaluate health-related patient outcomes and PCPs' decision-making as they recommend the study therapies to their patients.

Funding source: NIH National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM)

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Objectives:

- 1) Determine whether outcomes for chronic low back pain (CLBP) improve when patients are referred from primary care for complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) treatments. We will evaluate health-related improvement over time with **progressive muscle relaxation or clinical massage therapy**.
- 2) Better understand primary care practitioners' decision-making to recommend CAM for CLBP by exploring selected factors in their decisions to recommend progressive muscle relaxation or clinical massage therapy to patients with CLBP.

Rationale:

Chronic low back pain is a significant health problem in Kentucky and across the U.S. The medical use of opioid medications has significantly increased in recent years. Health care providers are concerned about addiction rates and patient misuse, and have indicated to us that they need alternative and effective treatments. It will be particularly valuable to examine the effectiveness of alternative approaches that could be offered in primary care and rural settings. Also, better understanding of PCPs' decision-making about alternative therapies for their CLBP patients could promote PCPs' and patients' future access to such therapies. Massage and relaxation therapies are promising because they have demonstrated efficacy for chronic low back pain. However, their effectiveness in the "real world" of primary care is less well studied.

Methods: We are enrolling approximately 50 primary care practitioners (PCPs) and 140 patients.

Patient participants receive 12 weeks of therapy for chronic low back pain (either progressive muscle relaxation or clinical massage therapy). Patients receiving Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) are given a personal digital assistant (PDA), which will talk them through the relaxation techniques and record their use. Patients receiving Clinical Massage Therapy (CMT) receive up to 10 therapy sessions. Techniques may include myofascial release, neuromuscular therapy, active isolated stretching, craniosacral therapy, and deep tissue massage.

PCP participants: include family physicians, general internists, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants may participate. For a 6-week period, they fill out a small, convenient point-of-care "Pocket Card" after every visit with an eligible CLBP patient. The survey card briefly describes the visit (e.g., CLBP diagnoses), the PCP's perceptions of the patient's health and functioning, and the PCP's reasons for or against recommending the patient to the study.

During these visits, based on their clinical judgment, PCPs recommend appropriate and eligible patients to receive either massage or relaxation therapy through the study. The decision to recommend is based on their clinical judgment.