



Factors Associated With Seeking Medical Care For Internet Users

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Introduction

It is difficult to enrol subjects in epidemiological research who have not sought medical care. The purpose of this study was to examine factors that discriminate between back pain sufferers who self-manage an episode and those who seek medical care.

Methods

A website (www.cbi.ca/cyberspine) was designed to help people manage their back pain episodes and provide researchers with their prospective epidemiological data. Visitors gave informed consent and complete a series of structured questionnaires and physical tests.

All visitors were asked if they had sought medical care for back pain from a health care professional in the last 3 months. Those responding 'yes' were categorized as the CARE group; those responding 'no' became the noCARE group.

Results

The website was activated on January 27, 1998, and as of December 31, 1999, 1789 individuals had completed the online assessment; 1072 qualified for the study based on pre-screening questions to identify those with current LBP (CARE=762, noCARE= 310).

The mean age of the sample was 39.9 years (S.D.=10.7) with 55.2% males. The mean VAS rating for back pain was 6.03 (S.D.=2.26).

Multivariable logistic regression revealed 6 significant factors ($p < 0.05$) associated with a probability of seeking medical care:

Variable	Odds Ratio	95% C.I.	p-value
1. Questionnaire Score	0.92	(0.91-0.94)	0.0001
2. VAS >7	0.61	(0.42-0.89)	0.0104
3. Positive SLR	1.58	(1.06-2.34)	0.0233
4. Positive Toe Raise	1.83	(1.13-2.98)	0.0148
5. >10 weeks in Pain	1.60	(1.13-2.98)	0.0031
6. Age	1.02	(1.003-1.032)	0.0186

Discussion

This study represents preliminary research using a comparison group rarely identified in the literature, those who do not seek medical care for LBP. Those with higher pain ratings were less likely to seek medical care if they had high functional abilities (high questionnaire scores). Thus, reduced functional abilities were more important than increased pain intensity in this sample of people who used the Internet to obtain advice about low back pain.

Conclusion

This research helps establish the Internet as a resource for scientific studies on low back pain when the data is collected in an epidemiologically rigorous manner. This study identifies six factors related to the back pain sufferer's decision to seek medical care.