

Acute Low Back Pain Care Pathway - Action Ideas for Stakeholders

Health Equity is central to value-based care and critical to ensuring the health and well-being of all individuals, particularly those historically or presently underserved. There are multiple opportunities at every point on the Care Pathway to improve health equity. All Stakeholders should consider the following action steps:

- ▶ Language and literacy level for all forms of member/patient communication, electronic and physical.
- ▶ Improving access by way of increasing availability of video visits when clinically appropriate, covering the cost of broadband for members/patients without it, and covering the cost of transportation necessary to obtain care.
- ▶ Implement training for all policy-making and patient-facing staff and providers on unconscious bias, social determinants of health and health equity for racial and ethnic groups, the LGBTQ+ and senior populations and people with language barriers, financial barriers and disabilities.
- ▶ Implement and sustain a clinic/company priority of cultural awareness; recruit and hire administration, patient-facing staff and providers from diverse populations that represent the patient community.
- ▶ Stratify metrics to enable the evaluation of data by race, ethnicity, language, Social Determinants of Health, gender orientation and age.

Education is critical to promote patient-centered care and improve patient reported outcomes. The more clearly a condition is understood, the more likely it is that an individual will be comfortable with their care and adhere to recommendations. There are multiple opportunities to provide education before low back pain occurs and at every point on the Care Pathway. All Stakeholders should consider the following action steps:

- ▶ Provide member/patient materials focusing on prevention (ergonomics, prolonged sitting, exercise, fitness, nutrition, etc.).
- ▶ Provide member/patient materials that address (don't dismiss) the issues patients are having (pain, fear, work interruption, etc.), and focus on the common course of low back pain (symptoms, what is high-value care, what is low-value care, the importance of Timely Triage, symptoms to watch for and who to contact should they arise, etc.). Use WHA's Understanding and Treating Low Back Pain handout and incorporate it into EMR education templates.
- ▶ Educate providers about evidence-based care pathways and the common course of low back pain (symptoms, what is high-value care, what is low-value care, the importance of Timely Triage, red and yellow flags, and appropriate referral networks for care, etc.).

Care Pathway Action Steps:

1. Timely Triage

Why is triage in the first 48 hours critical?

Quick triage is necessary to rule out specific urgent conditions and to explain the course of back pain to the patient. These actions together will help keep non-emergent cases from presenting at the ED and direct emergent cases appropriately to the ED.

Shouldn't members be calling their Primary Care Provider (PCP) for triage?

Ideally, yes. But not all patients have PCPs and sometimes they cannot reach them immediately or after hours. That being the case, we recommend (and Purchasers request) that members have another 24-hour option in place as an alternative to going to the ED for non-emergencies.

How Health Plans Can Act:

- ▶ Offer and encourage members to utilize 24-hour triage via phone line or video visit.
- ▶ Use triage model that follows Care Pathway guidelines and uses patient shared decision making to improve patient engagement.
- ▶ Review engagement tools and/or incentives to increase utilization of 24-hour triage service.
- ▶ Offer payment approach in alignment with the Health Care Authority's (HCA) new Advanced Primary Care model that allows for comprehensive coverage including the staff resources necessary to provide Timely Triage.

How Providers Can Act:

- ▶ Offer and encourage patients to utilize 24-hour triage via phone line or video visit.
- ▶ Provide adequate and trained staffing so patient can access same or next day triage by phone or video visit.
- ▶ Use triage model that follows Care Pathway guidelines, uses patient shared decision making to improve patient engagement and gives patients the sense that they have been thoroughly evaluated by an appropriate clinician.

How Purchasers Can Act:

- ▶ Encourage members to utilize 24-hour triage via phone line or video visit.
- ▶ Minimize or remove patient out-of-pocket expenses for services provided by clinicians that provide Timely Triage.
- ▶ Hold health plans accountable for having tools for Timely Triage in accordance with the Care Pathway.

2. Triage for Red Flags

Why does this Pathway include triage for red flags?

It is important to include the ruling out of potentially emergent conditions before proceeding along this pathway.

Triage for Red Flags (continued)

How Health Plans Can Act:

- ▶ Use a triage model that follows Care Pathway guidelines, screens for red flags and uses patient shared decision making to improve patient engagement and make appropriate referrals for red flags.
- ▶ Develop interactive triage tool for patient use on line.

How Providers Can Act:

- ▶ Use a triage model that follows Care Pathway guidelines, screens for red flags and uses patient shared decision making to improve patient engagement and make appropriate referrals for red flags.

How Purchasers Can Act:

- ▶ Hold health plans accountable for creating networks that include providers that triage for red flags in accordance with the Care Pathway.
- ▶ Implement a digital point solution that follows the Care Pathway guidelines for red flags as a complement to the medical benefit design.

3. Triage for Yellow Flags

Why is triage for yellow flags important?

The yellow flags can be indicators of things that put patients at greater risk for transition from acute low back pain to chronic low back pain, increasing instances of long term disability, job loss and distress. They represent opportunities for more focused interventions to direct patients toward wellness.

How Health Plans Can Act:

- ▶ Use a triage model that follows Care Pathway guidelines, screens for yellow flags and uses patient shared decision making to improve patient engagement and make appropriate referrals for yellow flags.

How Providers Can Act:

- ▶ Use a triage model that follows Care Pathway guidelines, screens for yellow flags and uses patient shared decision making to improve patient engagement and make appropriate referrals for yellow flags.

How Purchasers Can Act:

- ▶ Hold health plans accountable for creating networks that include providers that triage for yellow flags in accordance with the Care Pathway.
- ▶ Implement a digital point solution that follows the Care Pathway guidelines for yellow flags as a complement to the medical benefit design.

4. Supported Self-Management

Why is Supported Self-Management important?

When patients receive care within a credible and supportive context, patient satisfaction is higher and patient outcomes are better. Most uncomplicated low back pain improves with fairly straightforward interventions but when the opportunity exists for patients to ask questions, check back in with someone clinically knowledgeable enough to provide recommendations and engage the patient to understand the ways in which their symptoms are affecting their life - to have support - patient engagement is higher and low-value care options are accessed less.

What if patient doesn't have a PCP or PCP is unavailable?

If the member's symptoms are not emergent, consider recommending that they see a Physical Therapist or a Chiropractor (to whom patient can self-refer), as these providers can also appropriately triage, monitor acute low back pain and offer Supported Self-Management.

How Health Plans Can Act:

- ▶ Create a planned follow-up communication schedule with the member at the time of triage and encourage them to actively reach out to PCP for continued Supported Self-Management.

How Providers Can Act:

- ▶ Create a planned follow up communication schedule with patient at the time of triage and use patient shared decision making to improve patient engagement.
- ▶ Implement an electronic platform to engage patients in the check-in steps of Supported Self-Management.

How Purchasers Can Act:

- ▶ Implement a digital point solution that engages in a planned follow up communication schedule with patients and uses patient shared decision making to improve patient engagement, including open communication with Primary Care Provider, to complement the medical benefit design.

5. Appropriate Referral

Why is a multimodal approach beneficial for treating low back pain?

A whole body, multimodal treatment model is one with options to help identify individual patient risk, lifestyle changes, behavioral change, and stress reduction in the treatment of low back pain that does not resolve. It incorporates patient shared decision making to improve patient engagement. Options increase access and options increase equity.

Appropriate Referral (continued)

How Health Plans Can Act:

- ▶ Broaden care networks (in urban, suburban and rural communities) of clinicians appropriate to provide care for yellow flag concerns or low back pain that persists beyond 4-6 weeks.

How Providers Can Act:

- ▶ Utilize an active network of clinicians appropriate to provide care for yellow flag concerns or low back pain that persists beyond 4-6 weeks.

How Purchasers Can Act:

- ▶ Minimize or remove patient out-of-pocket expenses for services provided by clinicians appropriate to provide care for yellow flag concerns or low back pain that persists beyond 4-6 weeks.
- ▶ Implement a digital solution that utilizes an active network of the clinicians appropriate to provide care for yellow flag concerns or low back pain that persists beyond 4-6 weeks, and communicates care plans with Primary Care teams.
- ▶ Hold health plans accountable for creating networks that include providers that provide multiple care options accordance with the Care Pathway.

About the Washington Health Alliance's Low Back Pain Implementation Collaborative

The Low Back Pain Implementation Collaborative brings together more than 30 stakeholders, including health care purchasers, health plan leaders, health care providers, and experts to work on solutions to address the treatment of acute low back pain. It is estimated that 80 percent of Americans will have some form of back pain in their lifetime, but not all of them will receive high-quality health care to address it. In Washington state alone, the latest data shows that approximately 72,000 people with low-back pain received more than 140,000 low-value services at an estimated cost of nearly \$10 million in 2020.

Since it was formed in February 2022, the collaborative has published an Acute Low Back Pain Care Pathway, along with a host of resources and tools to improve equitable access to care. The Care Pathway and additional resources can be found on [the Alliance's website](#).