

Guidelines for Patient Shared-Decision Making for Acute Low Back Pain

Educating patients about a condition they are experiencing and including them in the decision-making process around care choices both engages and empowers them. Research shows that patients involved in Shared Decision-Making (SDM) are more invested in carrying out initial recommendations, following up on care plans and incorporating lifestyle interventions designed to prevent recurrence of symptoms. They ultimately obtain less unnecessary, low-value care and have better patient reported outcomes.

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. Poor access to care can certainly be due to its cost, but there are other reasons as well. Multiple barriers to access that a care team can only be aware of by engaging the patient can include: work hours, ability get through to provider clinics, wait time to get an appointment, availability of appointments at convenient hours, availability of transportation or equipment for telehealth, financial burden, etc. There are multiple opportunities within patient SDM to improve health equity:

- Offer all communications in multiple languages and at an accessible literacy level
- Use electronic and physical assessment questionnaires to increase access
- Implement training for all staff assisting patients with the SDM process 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.

Engagement Steps to Include Patients in Their Care Choices

Listen

Allow patients and/or their care advocates ample time to ask questions, share their concerns, discuss their symptoms, their level of pain and the degree to which it interferes with their daily activities of living, etc. Ascertain their feelings about conservative, high-value treatment options vs. advanced treatment options (MRI, surgical consults, use of ED, etc.) when they are not indicated and, thus, of low value.

Inform

Educate patients and/or their care advocates about the commonality of low back pain, its common course of progression, including what red flags to look for. Provide information of who is available to contact at all hours if they do have red flags or just additional questions and concerns.

Ask

What are the patient's current barriers to obtaining appropriate care? What times does their schedule allow them time to make an appointment? When is transportation available? When is and advocate/interpreter, etc. available to accompany them if needed? Do they need to obtain childcare? Do they need an insurance referral? Is out-of-pocket expense an issue? This and other information will allow you to better address the patient's access needs.

Present Options

Taking all of the above into consideration, present patient with multiple appropriate options per the [Acute Low Back Pain Care Pathway](#) and provide information on their clinical effectiveness.

Assess the Decisions

Does the patient feel that they have been involved in selecting tests or treatments and informed about their options and likely outcomes? Are they clear about the decision being made and will they feel comfortable discussing their goals and preferences with health care providers about this condition? It is important to verify the patient feels engaged in decision making as this empowers them to on a path toward wellness.

Make a Plan

Verify the next course of action. Provide note for work absence if necessary. Provide contact information for scheduling if that is what the patient has chosen. Provide contact information for who patient should plan to follow up with in two weeks' time or sooner if questions or issues arise.