

# Chronic Low Back Pain in Older Adults

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Back pain in older adults is a common problem. In fact, up to half of all adults over the age of 65 report some type of body pain. Pain of any kind can decrease function and threaten the independence of seniors.

But with other illnesses, problems sleeping, and difficulty with mobility, it can be difficult to tell how much back pain contributes to disability in older adults. That's the focus of this study from the University of Pittsburgh.

Two groups of older adults were compared. All were mentally aware and alert. One group had moderate pain for at least three months. The second (control) group was pain-free. Each person was assessed thoroughly. Twenty-two measures of physical and mental health were collected.

The two groups were equal in terms of age, gender, and education. In comparing the two groups, the researchers found major differences in function. Eight of the 22 measures could explain the differences between the two groups. These included self-reported function, mood, and body mass index (BMI).

Other significant measures were severity of disc disease and ability to repeatedly rotate the trunk or reach forward without losing balance. All of these results show that older adults with chronic low back pain have decreased function compared with those who are pain-free.

The authors conclude that doctors can use these eight specific measures to assess older adults for loss of function caused by low back pain. Some of the tasks (repetitive trunk rotation, reaching forward) are simple to do and easy to test.

The Geriatric Depression Screen (GDS) was a good tool for assessing the effects of back pain on psychosocial function. Depression can be very disabling. With early diagnosis treatment can prevent decline in function and independence.

Thomas E. Rudy, et al. The Impact of Chronic Low Back Pain on Older Adults: A Comparative Study of Patients and Controls. In *PAIN*. October 2007. Vol. 131. No. 3. Pp. 293-301.