

Randomized, controlled trial of breath therapy for patients with chronic low-back pain.

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At Osher Center for Integrative Medicine at UCSF, researchers compared the effect of breath therapy (integrating body awareness, breathing, meditation and movement) with standard physical therapy on patients suffering from chronic lower back pain.. In a randomized, controlled clinical trial at Osher Center for Integrative Medicine, UCSF, researchers compared the effect of breath therapy (a technique integrating body awareness, breathing, meditation, and movement) on chronic lower back pain, as compared to standard physical therapy.

Thirty-six patients with chronic lower back pain were randomized to receive either 12 sessions of breath therapy or physical therapy over 6-8 weeks. Outcomes were measured at baseline, at the end of the intervention and at 6 months, by patients rating their pain on a visual analog scale, rating their functioning with the Roland Scale and their overall health with Short Form 36. In addition, balance was measured at the beginning and end of treatment.

The study found that patients in both groups improved. Pain scores were -2.7 in the breath therapy group, and -2.4 with the PT group. Breath therapy recipients improved in function (Roland: -4.8) and in the physical and emotional role (SF-36: +15.5 and 14.3). Physical therapy recipients improved in vitality (SF-36: +15.0). Average improvements were not different between groups. At six to eight weeks, results showed a trend favoring breath therapy; at six-months, a trend favoring physical therapy.

The study concluded that patients with chronic lower back pain did significantly improve with breath therapy, with standard measures of pain and disability being comparable to those resulting from high-quality, extended physical therapy. Breath therapy was safe. Qualitative data suggested improved coping skills and new insight into the effect of stress on the body as a result of breath therapy. Balance measures did not seem to be valid measures of clinical change.

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