

Doctors not prescribing best meds for back pain

By Nancy Shute, NPR

The misery of low back pain often drives people to the doctor to seek relief. But doctors are doing a pretty miserable job of treating back pain, a study finds.

Physicians are increasingly prescribing expensive scans, narcotic painkillers and other treatments that don't help in most cases, and can make things a lot worse. Since 1 in 10 of all primary care visits are for low back pain, this is no small matter.

What does help? Some ibuprofen or other over-the-counter painkiller, and maybe some physical therapy. That's the evidence-based protocol. With that regimen, most people's back pain goes away within three months.

But when researchers at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston looked at records of 23,918 doctor visits for simple back pain between 1999 and 2010, they found that doctors have actually been getting worse at prescribing scientifically based treatments.

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