

# Alexander technique and Supervised Physiotherapy Exercises in back pain (ASPEN): a four-group randomised feasibility trial

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## Plain English summary

### The ASPEN trial

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## Plain English summary

An Alexander technique teacher uses gentle hand contact and verbal instruction to help patients with chronic back pain become aware of and avoid harmful muscle tension and harmful ways of using muscles. The technique is applied in everyday tasks such as standing, sitting at a desk or walking. It is unclear if Alexander technique lessons and physiotherapy exercise classes would be more beneficial if they were both given, how many Alexander technique lessons are needed to make a difference and what might be the underlying reason for the improvements.

This was a feasibility study in preparation for a full trial. Patients with chronic or recurrent back pain were allocated by random selection to normal care, 10 Alexander technique lessons, 12 exercise classes or both Alexander technique lessons and exercise classes and followed up for 6 months. Participants completed questionnaires (regarding pain, functioning and other outcomes) and also had measurements made of their muscles and back function (muscle tone and activity, position sense, strength). In total, 19 participants were also interviewed to understand the key issues.

All study procedures proved feasible and acceptable to participants, including different methods of recruitment, but for some patients finding the time to practice the techniques and attending sessions was difficult.

Even with the small numbers in each group, both of the interventions probably provided clinically important benefits for patients, especially the combination group.

Better functioning at 6 months was particularly associated with better position sense, muscle tone and how elastic muscle is and there was some evidence that both the Alexander technique and exercise class interventions affected these variables.

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