

The effect of exercise therapy on work absenteeism: a systematic review.

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Background and aims: Chronic low back pain (CLBP) is a leading cause of disability worldwide and contributes to 13% of work absenteeism, placing a significant strain on healthcare systems. In Belgium alone, over €260 million is spent annually on treatment, excluding hospital costs, with global costs rising. Effective CLBP management is crucial to reduce absenteeism and promote return to work (RTW). This systematic review aims to explore the impact of exercise therapy on RTW in CLBP patients, before examining the effects of high-intensity training on work ability in the TECHNOHIT trial.

Methods: This review follows PRISMA 2020 guidelines. A literature search of PubMed and Web of Science identified studies on adults (18+) with chronic low back pain (CLBP) examining exercise interventions for work absenteeism or return to work (RTW). Interventions will be categorized (e.g., exercise modalities, multimodal vs. isolated therapy) to compare effects on RTW and work ability. Primary outcomes are RTW and absenteeism, with additional consideration of pain, disability, and psychosocial factors.

Results: 10 studies with 2468 participants with chronic low back pain were included. The most common interventions were trunk exercises, strength training, and general exercises. Other types of exercise such as yoga or endurance training were also included. Outcome measures included return to work, sick leave duration, and days until RTW. Various exercise forms reduced sick leave and promoted return to work.

Conclusions: In general, exercise therapy improves RTW outcomes. There is little significant difference between interventions. Due to heterogeneity in interventions and outcomes, it remains unclear which form of exercise and specific modalities are most effective.