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Recruitment of older adults in low back pain research: a survey with back pain researchers

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Introduction: Aging is followed by some specific biopsychosocial changes that can influence on back symptoms and disability. Interventions targeting older adults need to be tested in clinical trials (CTs) to verify whether current treatments are effective or whether new strategies are necessary targeting age-related changes. However, Paeck et al., 2015 showed that older adults are excluded from clinical trials with no signal of a trend in changing this scenario in the last 20 years.

Objectives: This study aimed to investigate the participation and reasons to not include older adults in clinical trials on LBP through an online survey applied to low back pain researchers.

Methods: We sent an electronic questionnaire to the participants of the 15th International Forum on Back and Neck Pain Research in Primary Care (N=200). A two-part specific questionnaire aiming to collect demographic details of participants and information about their current research activity was developed. The survey was pilot-tested with a group of five experts in the LBP and/or Epidemiology field and revised.

Results: The response rate was 40%. Of the respondents, 88.6% reported LBP as the primary research interest and 73.08% had been previously involved in a clinical trial for LBP. Although the inclusion of older adults reached about half (50.88%) of the researchers' last work, only 3.51% were designed to target exclusively older people. Regarding their current work, 57.69% of the respondents stated that they are working or planning a clinical trial for LBP. Whilst, 68.89% of those who reported the development of a new clinical trial are expecting to recruit older adults, this population is the main target in 22.58% of the clinical trials. For 89.75% of the respondents, older adults are under-represented in clinical trials for LBP, and 69.57% supported that this leads to less evidence-based treatments directed to this population. Consequently, for 81.16% of the respondents, this will generate an additional challenge for health providers. The exclusion of older adults from clinical trials based on an arbitrary age limit as an inclusion criterion is not justified for 70.13% of the respondents.

Conclusion: LBP experts are aware of the under-representativeness of older adults in clinical trials and its negative consequence to health providers and patients. The number of researchers planning to include older people in their future work is higher compared to their previous research, however, this population is still neglected by a significant number of researchers.