Low back pain prevalence in Brazil: a cross-sectional study

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Introduction: Low back pain is a major health problem worldwide and is highly associated with disability and work absenteeism. Most low back pain prevalence studies were conducted in high income countries and we are unaware of a prevalence study in a developing, mid-income country, such as Brazil. Objective: The aim of this study was to measure the point, 1-year and lifetime prevalence of low back pain in the metropolitan area of São Paulo/Brazil by recruiting a representative sample of the Brazilian population following all existing guidelines on conducting prevalence studies for low back pain. Methods: A cross-sectional study. One thousand three hundred individuals of both genders and over 18 years old, living in the urban area of the metropolitan region of São Paulo-Brazil were recruited. Data collection were performed in 10 out of 97 different neighbourhoods of São Paulo. We collected data on point-prevalence, 1-year prevalence and lifetime prevalence. We also collected a range of demographic characteristics plus pain intensity (measured by a 0-10 numerical rating scale) and disability (measured by the 24-item Roland Morris Disability Questionnaire) for those who reported back pain at the time of the interview. This study was submitted and approved by the ethics and Research Committee of the Universidade Cidade de São Paulo (CAAE 44662415.0.0000.0064). Results: Point prevalence was 12.6%; the 1-year prevalence was 45.5% and the lifetime prevalence was 61.8%. For those participants who presented low back pain at the time of interview the mean pain intensity was 5.75 points (Standard deviation – SD = 2.16) and the mean disability was 8.52 points (SD 6.73). Discussion and Conclusions: This is the largest prevalence study for low back pain in a mid-income country. Prevalence estimates of back pain in Brazil are very similar to the ones reported in high income countries. The lifetime prevalence of back pain in Brazil is much higher compared to the existing data from developed countries. The results of this study show that back pain is a major problem in Brazil and it is likely that the similar estimates could be found in other mid-income countries. The results of this study could be used for policy-makers and research funders in order to address key issues related to primary care for back pain patients.

Descriptors: low back pain, prevalence, Brazil