

Screening for yellow flags

Yellow flags are psychosocial factors that increase the risk of developing or perpetuating long-term disability and work loss associated with low back pain.

Kendall et al. (1997) developed guidelines for assessing 'yellow flags' in acute low back pain, outlining factors that should be assessed particularly when progress is slower than expected. The presence of such factors is a prompt for further detailed assessment and early intervention. 'Red flags' and 'yellow flags' are not mutually exclusive and intervention may be required to address both clinical and psychosocial risk factors.

There is good agreement that the following factors are important and consistently predict poor outcomes:

- > the presence of beliefs that back pain is harmful or potentially severely disabling
- > fear-avoidance behaviour (avoiding a movement or activity due to misplaced anticipation of pain) and reduced activity levels
- > tendency to low mood and withdrawal from social interaction
- > an expectation that passive treatments rather than active participation will help.

Suggested questions (to be phrased in treatment provider's own words) to assist with identifying psychosocial barriers to recovery include:

- > Have you had time off work in the past with back pain?
- > What do you understand is the cause of your back pain?
- > What are you expecting will help you?
- > How is your employer responding to your back pain?
- > Your co-workers? Your family?
- > What are you doing to cope with back pain?
- > Do you think that you will return to work? When?

The Keele STarT Back Screening Tool is a brief, validated tool which is being used to help identify patients who are 'at risk' of persistent symptoms. Further information and the screening tool can be accessed on this site.

For further information regarding Assessing Psychosocial Yellow Flags in Acute Low Back Pain and details of the Acute Low Back Pain Screening Questionnaire refer to: Linton and Hallden, (1996) or see www.nzgg.org.nz.