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HEALTH ANSWERS

What is the Alexander Technique?

By Judy Foreman
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The Alexander Technique applies heightened self-awareness of posture to change the way one moves and sits. It is taught in a series of lessons, usually private, during which the teacher watches how you stand, walk, sit, and move your body to see where you unconsciously hold muscle tension, said Jill Geiger, a certified practitioner in Newton.

The teacher also places his or her hands on your body to detect areas of tension and guides you, with words and gentle hands, to realign your body to achieve better posture and relieve tension. The lessons cost about \$70 each and may or may not be reimbursed by insurance.

The technique was developed a century ago by F.M. Alexander, who used it to aid his career as an actor and orator.

New data suggest the Alexander Technique can ease back pain for at least a year. In the randomized study, which involved 579 people with chronic back pain and was published this summer in the British Medical Journal, six lessons proved almost as effective as 24 if patients also did 30 minutes of brisk walking or the equivalent every day. Massage helped pain, too, but the effects wore off quickly.

Overall, exercise alone (such as brisk walking) led to a 17 percent improvement in back pain, said Dr. Paul Little, the lead author of the study and a professor of primary care research at the University of Southampton in England, in an e-mail. Six lessons of the Alexander Technique alone also led to a 17 percent improvement.

Twenty-four Alexander lessons, even without walking is more than twice as effective as either walking or six lessons alone. But you can get almost as good results - for much less money - by combining six Alexander lessons with brisk walking.

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