Does anyone know what happens to people after they start having problems with back pain? I've heard that almost everyone will have a backache sometime in their life. I just had my first one. It went away after three weeks. What can I expect now?

Studies all over the world report back pain in adults. The incidence ranges from 10 to 80 per cent. Most experts agree that the 80 per cent is more accurate.

What happens over time is called the natural course of a disease, illness, or condition such as low back pain (LBP). Most researchers follow back pain patients up to two years. A few report results after five years. Only a small number are on record reporting 10-year outcomes.

Recently, a group of researchers from Sweden studied 790 adults seeing help from a doctor for their first episode of LBP. They followed this group for five years to study the natural course of the condition and to see what effect general exercise had on LBP. Results were compared for men and women.

What they found was that results don't differ much between the sexes. In other words, the natural course of LBP was very similar for men and women. Pain intensity and disability improved most during the first six months after the start of the LBP.

Loss of function and disability were the most common reasons why people went to a doctor. Repeated episodes of back pain were reported in up to two-thirds of all patients. General exercise doesn't seem to speed up recovery. Other studies report that specific back exercises can make a difference.