

Prevalence and the Human and Social Cost of Pain

Key Points

- One in five Australians, including children and adolescents, lives with chronic pain.
- One in three Australians over 65 lives with chronic pain.
- Untreated chronic pain can lead to significant human suffering.
- Chronic pain is associated with 40 percent of forced retirements.
- Chronic pain is Australia's third most costly health burden.
- Between 50 to 80 percent of people with pain are under-treated.
- The rate of depression is 20% higher among people with chronic pain than the rest of the population

How prevalent is pain in Australia today?

Pain is one of the biggest health issues today – every bit as big as cancer, AIDS and coronary heart disease.

One in five Australians, including adolescents and children, lives with chronic pain – and almost one in five GP consultations involve a patient with chronic pain. This prevalence rises to one in three in the older (over 65) age group.^{1,2}

The greatest prevalence of chronic pain occurs in the 65-69 age bracket for men and the 80-84 age bracket for women.¹

Currently there are about 3.2 million adults living with chronic pain, and this number is projected to increase to 5 million people by 2050.³

What is the personal impact of chronic pain?

Left untreated, chronic pain can have a devastating impact on all aspects of sufferers' lives – such as sleep, sex, work, exercise and routine self-care. It can also severely impact personal relationships, social interactions and lifestyles.

The impact on personal life is greatest in young adults, with four in five people with chronic pain aged 20-24 reporting interference in daily life. The second highest reported interference is in the 55-59 age group (one in five).¹

The vast majority of people with severe and very severe pain – 90 percent – have some level of interference with work (inside and outside the home).⁴

In people of working age, back problems and arthritis – both associated with chronic pain – account for 40 percent of forced retirements.⁵

As chronic pain is largely invisible, sufferers can feel misunderstood and stigmatised, by co-workers, friends, family, and even the medical profession.⁶

Rates of depression are 20 percent higher among people with chronic pain than the rest of the population, and up to one in five suicides in Australia are related to physical health problems.^{7,8}

Does chronic pain affect children and adolescents?⁹

Between 25 to 35 per cent of children experience chronic pain, with the greatest incidence in adolescence, especially for young girls.

About five per cent of children have moderate to severe pain, with headaches, abdominal pain, limb pain and complex regional pain syndrome the most common forms of pain.

Chronic pain in children is likely to manifest in low school attendance, poorer grades, and cessation of sporting or other activities. Families are also affected, with parents missing work and siblings marginalised.

For some, the eventual result is social isolation and depression, and these children tend to become adults who are not able to effectively engage with work and society.

Children and adolescents who present with pain on a regular basis should not be ignored, as early intervention is essential in order to help them lead more functional lives and achieve better outcomes as adults.

What is the economic impact of chronic pain?³

The economic cost of chronic pain in Australia is estimated at \$34.3 billion per annum. It is the nation's third most costly health problem, ranking only after cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal conditions.

The impact on the nation's productivity is significant, with losses estimated at \$11.7 billion per annum (34 percent of total pain-related costs). This equates to 36.5 million workdays lost each year. The cost to the health system is approximately \$7 billion per annum.

It is estimated that half of the economic cost of chronic pain could be saved by providing effective and timely treatment.

Is pain adequately treated?

In Australia today, unrelieved pain is a major issue. Up to 80 percent of people living with chronic pain are missing out on treatment that could improve their health and quality of life – due to a serious shortage of pain services.¹⁰

Patients with chronic pain face long waiting times

to access multi-disciplinary pain services in public hospitals – frequently more than one year – and people in rural, regional and remote areas and indigenous communities, where prevalence may be even higher, are most at risk of missing out on adequate treatment.¹¹

Regarding acute or cancer pain, it is estimated that 50 percent of adults and children are under-treated, despite the possibility of effective treatments for most patients.¹²

What is the National Pain Strategy?

The National Pain Strategy provides a blueprint for transforming the way that pain is understood and treated and calls for pain to be recognised as a national health priority.

It provides recommendations for a national framework for the best practice assessment, treatment and management of acute, chronic and cancer pain, and is the result of collaborative work by more than 200 health professionals, consumers and other stakeholders.

To view the National Pain Strategy, visit:
www.painaustralia.org.au

References

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