



SPINAL HEALTH MONTH
1-30 JUNE 2026

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30
YEARS

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Back Pain & Mental Health Factsheet

Back pain remains one of the leading causes of disability in Australia and is the single leading cause of disability globally. Back pain can often lead to poorer quality of life, psychological distress and bodily pain. If left untreated, back pain sufferers can sometimes develop a chronic back pain disorder that can lead to disability, isolation and increase mental health challenges.

Back pain is a musculoskeletal disorder that affects over 4 million Australians. Long-term back problems are estimated to cost the Australian economy \$638 billion in lost productivity over the next decade.

What are back problems?

Back problems are a musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) described as a range of problems related to the bones, joints, connective tissue, muscles and nerves of the back that can affect the neck (cervical spine), upper back (thoracic spine) and lower back (lumbar spine), as well as the sacrum and tailbone. Examples of back problems include back or spine pain (such as lower back pain, and sciatica), vertebrae and disc disorders (such as narrowing of the spinal canal, and disc degeneration), and deforming disorders (such as scoliosis).

For about 8 in 10 Australians who suffer back pain, it's not caused by any particular condition. This is called 'non-specific low back pain' which is most common in people aged 35 to 55 years, but it can affect people of all ages.

More than 3.2 million working-age Australians are expected to be living with chronic back problems by 2033, leading to a loss of approximately 4.6 percent to Australia's Gross Domestic Product over a 10-year period.

What causes back pain?

Back pain can be caused by muscle or ligament strain caused by heavy physical work; weakness in back and abdominal muscles; frequent twisting, bending or lifting; poor posture or sitting for long periods (i.e. sitting in an office environment or gaming); too little physical activity; being overweight and aging. Stress can also be a factor along with a range of medical conditions including disc problems, arthritis or osteoporosis.

Back problems can cause lost social and physical activity, concentration and work capacity and are a significant cause of disability and lost productivity.

Why can back pain sometimes cause mental ill-health?

The link between MSDs, specifically back pain and depression is well documented in research studies that found people living with chronic back pain are at heightened risk of experiencing mental health problems. Some people with back pain may feel irritable or short-tempered. Others may worry about whether the pain will control their life, and some experience feelings of helplessness impacting their mental health.

While chronic back pain can lead to developing psychological and social problems, depressive symptoms can worsen back pain and increase the disability associated with the condition. This in turn can exacerbate back pain's negative impact on the mental health of sufferers. This vicious cycle, where back pain triggers a mental health problem that leads to the original back problem worsening can accelerate if left untreated to break the pain cycle.

Chiropractic healthcare is an effective, gentle, drug-free option that can help prevent chronic back pain and limit the impact back pain has on mental health. If back pain is impacting your mental ill-health, consult your GP.

How common is back pain and what is its impact?

Back pain is very common with one in six Australian's reporting having back problems that can impact both their physical and mental health. For many, back pain can arise suddenly (acute back pain) but typically improves or resolves within three to six weeks. However, recurrence is common, and some individuals may experience more persistent pain lasting beyond three months. Most feel pain, stiffness and soreness or find it hard to turn or bend. Some say the pain feels like a sharp pain while others report dull aches or spasms. With sciatica, the pain can travel down one or both of the legs.

Can pain medication alone treat back pain?

Research from leading university studies suggests that opioids do not relieve 'acute' low back pain (lasting up to 12 weeks) but may exacerbate the condition leading to increased pain and may cause harm.

Who are most at risk of back pain?

Working Australians doing strenuous physical work that strain the spine including lifting, repetitive actions, bending, squatting, standing and even sitting for extended periods.

Older Australians aged over 65 years commonly experience chronic low back pain.

Inactive Australians who don't exercise and spend long hours sitting can develop poor posture, weight gain and musculoskeletal problems including chronic back pain.

Chiropractic healthcare is an effective drug-free treatment for back pain to improve spinal health and overall wellbeing.

ACA chiropractors are Australia's leaders in chiropractic healthcare.

ACA chiropractors are five-year university educated healthcare professionals who treat a range of musculoskeletal disorders including back pain. They play a vital role in managing the spinal health of Australians of all ages.

How do ACA chiropractors treat back pain?

ACA chiropractors take a holistic approach to spinal health and overall wellbeing. They treat the underlying cause of back pain, not just the symptoms to minimise long-term implications and provide personalised, specialised chiropractic healthcare including spinal health assessments and gentle adjustments to help manage back pain, increase mobility and strengthen the spine.

Every week, more than 400,000 chiropractic consultations help everyday Australians maintain their spinal health.

If you or someone you know suffers back pain, consult an ACA chiropractor for preferred drug-free, non-surgical, low-risk, holistic treatment of musculoskeletal disorders including back pain so you can get back to feeling good!

Consult an ACA chiropractor today to maintain a healthy spine to support a healthy mind by visiting consultachiro.org.au

Spinal Health Month is the Australian Chiropractors Association's flagship campaign aimed at educating Australians about the importance of maintaining positive spinal health. Look for the ACA Member logo at your local chiropractor or to locate an ACA chiropractor near you, visit

consultachiro.org.au

For a full list of references, visit chiro.org.au/references