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Seniors Carry Australia's Heaviest Back Pain Burden: A Rising Mental Health Toll as Chronic Pain Takes Hold

National Spinal Health Month: Week 4: 22–30 June 2026 A Healthy Spine Supports A Healthy Mind

TODAY, in the final week of National Spinal Health Month, the Australian Chiropractors Association (ACA) revealed that older Australians are carrying the nation's heaviest back pain burden, with seniors recording the highest rates of chronic pain of any age group and a burden that for most, impacts their daily life.

According to new data obtained from the **2026 Australian Spinal Health Survey** (May 2026), an independent national survey of 1,040 Australian adults by Pureprofile revealed that **87.3% of Australians aged 61 and over have experienced back pain in their lifetime**, with **83.3%** reporting back pain in the past 12 months.

Among senior back pain sufferers, almost half (**48.3%**) reported chronic pain lasting three months or more - the highest chronic pain rate of any age group surveyed.

ACA President Dr Billy Chow said, "The survey reveals that for most older Australians, back pain is not a temporary complaint that will resolve on its own – it is a persistent, long-term condition that impacts their lives.

"Only 16.5% of seniors with low back pain reported that their condition has fully resolved, the lowest resolution rate of any age group, while among Australians aged 81 and over, chronic pain reaches 56.8% – the highest of any group in the survey.

"Coexisting back pain and mental health conditions are associated with impaired quality of life, however for seniors the burden is most strongly expressed through chronic pain, reduced mobility, sleep disruption and a progressive loss of independence, all compounding sufferers' overall health and wellbeing," said Dr Chow.

The survey found that reduced mobility is a defining burden for older Australians, with **42.5% of seniors** reporting they are less physically mobile due to back pain - significantly higher than the 25.3% recorded across all back pain sufferers, while **29.5% of seniors** reported loss of sleep compared to 23.1% of all sufferers.

"Loss of mobility and disrupted sleep in older age can impact independence, social participation, and mental wellbeing because when back pain limits a person's ability to move freely, it can accelerate functional decline and increase isolation," Dr Chow said.

"The data tells us that the retirement years are a critical point for the mental health of older Australians suffering back pain because when it develops into a chronic condition, depression and anxiety rise," he said.

The mental health toll is most pronounced in early senior years with **Australians aged 61–70, 17.3% reporting depression or anxiety as a direct result of back pain** that climbs to 18.6% among women in this age group - one of the highest depression and anxiety rates of any age band surveyed, coinciding with the time of life when chronic pain accelerates sharply into the senior years.

Although seniors reported lower rates of anxiety, stress and depression than younger Australians, **30.3% reported a moderate-to-extreme mental health impact** which may understate the true psychological toll.

"For older Australians, pain-related depression is associated with social withdrawal, reduced motivation and accelerated functional decline."

"High chronicity, mobility loss, sleep disruption and the impact on quality-of-life, all point to a long-term, pervasive burden that may be normalised or under-reported with age," said Dr Chow.

The link between chronic back pain and mental ill-health has been recorded in numerous research studies, including by the International Association for the Study of Pain (2021) that found people living with chronic back pain are at heightened risk of experiencing mental health problems.

"When chronic back pain leads to psychological and social problems, depressive symptoms can worsen back pain and increase the disability associated with the condition, which can then exacerbate back pain's negative impact on the mental health of sufferers," he said.

Of concern is the high reliance on pain medication among older Australians who recorded the highest daily medication use of any group, with **15.7% using over-the-counter (OTC) pain medication daily** and **14.7% using prescription medication daily** despite clinical evidence questioning the effectiveness of the most commonly used medications for back pain.

The survey also found that older Australians are the nation's most engaged chiropractic patients, with **49.8% of seniors having consulted a chiropractor** - the highest consultation rate of any age group.

Among all who had consulted a chiropractor for back pain, 77.3% reported improvement, 39.2% said their pain had significantly improved or was totally resolved, while 10.1% reported additional mental health and wellbeing benefits beyond pain relief after treatment.

“Preventing and managing chronic back pain that improves function and quality of life represents a significant clinical outcome that supports improved mental health and independence in healthy ageing,” said Dr Chow.

‘*Fear avoidance*’ by restricting or avoiding movement out of fear of pain or re-injury is particularly prevalent among older Australians, with 55% of ACA member chiropractors reporting that the majority of their senior patients exhibit fear avoidance behaviour - the highest of any age group.

“Restricting movement out of fear compounds physical deconditioning and exacerbates pain conditions, reinforcing the importance of remaining active and seeking professionally guided healthcare through an integrated approach to clinical treatment,” Dr Chow said.

The ACA's recently released feasibility study through CQUniversity and Macquarie University's MindSpot reinforced the value of the integrated biopsychosocial model approach to back pain treatments, demonstrating that combining online psychologically informed pain management with routine musculoskeletal healthcare can lead to improved physical and psychological outcomes.

“These findings are consistent with ACA-funded clinical research conducted at CQUniversity by Associate Professor Katie de Luca, whose landmark *Back Complaints in the Elderly: Chiropractic – Australia* (BACE:C-A) study investigated the clinical course and predictors of disability in older adults with low back pain.

The research found that quality of life, comorbid chronic health conditions and lower limb pain all have detrimental effects on the overall health and wellbeing of older adults, with chronic primary low back pain associated with loss of mobility, frailty, falls, poor sleep, and moderate-to-severe disability.

A/Prof de Luca's research found strong evidence that depressive symptoms are associated with a heightened risk of future back pain onset, and that older people with chronic primary low back pain experience significantly greater declines in cognitive areas such as memory, attention and processing speed than those without it.

Encouragingly, A/Prof de Luca's COMEBACK study which assessed adapted exercise for older people with back pain and comorbid conditions, found participants achieved an increase in functional capacity and aerobic stamina, a decrease in depression and anxiety, and reduced frailty - all leading to an improvement in reported quality of life which are consistent with the conservative, active-care approach endorsed in the WHO's 2023 guidelines including spinal manipulation and warn against bed rest.

“A/Prof de Luca's research shows that seniors are significantly burdened by spinal conditions and a range of additional negative implications, including a decline in mental and cognitive health that can be effectively treated with evidence-based healthcare to restore function, reduce depression and anxiety, and improve the quality of life and overall wellbeing of older Australians living with back pain,” said Dr Chow.

“A healthy spine supports a healthy mind at every stage of life, and we encourage seniors, their families and carers not to dismiss back pain as an inevitable part of ageing, but to maintain mobility, manage fear avoidance, and access evidence-based healthcare, to improve the quality of life of older Australians,” he said.

Spinal health is critically linked to healthy ageing so during Week 4 of National Spinal Health Month (22–30 June), the ACA is encouraging older Australians, their families and carers to prioritise their spinal health and seek evidence-based, drug-free chiropractic healthcare to help maintain mobility, minimise the impact of back pain on their mental health and support independent, healthy ageing.

Older Australians are encouraged to access free spinal health resources, practical guides and information at www.spinalhealth.org.au to improve their spinal health and overall wellbeing.

– ENDS –

INTERVIEW REQUESTS

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IMAGES, VISION OR GRAPHICS, DATA, VISIT MEDIA CENTRE: <https://bit.ly/SHM26-Media>

JOURNALIST NOTES

OLDER AUSTRALIANS (60+) AND BACK PAIN – DATA AND BACKGROUND

- National Independent Consumer Survey | n=1,040 Australian adults | Pureprofile, May 2026
 - National Member Survey | n=110 Members – 75% with 11+ years clinical experience | ACA, May 2026
- Download complete report for comprehensive data and analysis:** <https://bit.ly/Back-Pain-Australia-2026>

48.3%

of seniors have chronic back pain – the highest of any age group

56.8%

of Australians aged 81+ have chronic back pain

49.8%

of seniors have consulted a chiropractor – highest of any age group

16.5%

of seniors with LBP have fully resolved their condition – the lowest

SENIOR BACK PAIN: PREVALENCE & CHRONICITY

- **87.3%** of Australians aged 61+ have experienced back pain in their lifetime; **83.3%** in the past 12 months.
- Back pain affects **88.2%** of Australians aged 61–70, **84.9%** aged 71–80 and **89.8%** aged 81+. In older age, back pain is the norm rather than the exception.
- **48.3%** of senior back pain sufferers have chronic pain (lasting 3+ months) – the highest rate of any age group, compared with 44.1% nationally.
- Chronicity accelerates with age: **41.7%** at 61–70, **42.2%** at 71–80 and **56.8%** at 81+ – the highest chronicity of any age group.
- Only **16.5%** of seniors with low back pain report their condition has fully resolved – the lowest resolution rate of any age group (vs 22.7% nationally).
- **11.9%** of seniors report their back pain has completely impacted their ability to work – more than double the national rate of 5.5%.

THE PHYSICAL & FUNCTIONAL BURDEN

- **42.5%** of seniors report reduced physical mobility from back pain – vs 25.3% of all sufferers (a 68% higher rate).
- **29.5%** of seniors report lost sleep due to back pain – vs 23.1% of all sufferers.
- **28.7%** of seniors say back pain affects their quality of life often or always; **83.1%** report quality-of-life impact at any level – the highest of any group.
- **19.5%** of seniors report chronic or recurring pain as a life impact, vs 15.6% of all sufferers.
- **7.3%** of seniors report relationship impacts from back pain, vs 4.7% of all sufferers.

PAIN MEDICATION USE – SENIORS CARRY THE HIGHEST DAILY BURDEN

- **15.7%** of seniors use OTC pain medication daily – the highest of any group, and around 45% more often than the general back pain population.
- **14.7%** of seniors use prescription medication daily – 67% higher than the overall average.
- Daily reliance reflects the chronic, long-standing nature of back pain in older Australians.

The University of Sydney's OPAL trial (The Lancet, 2023) found opioids no more effective than placebo for acute low back pain. The WHO's 2023 guidelines recommend non-pha

MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING IMPACT

- **30.3%** of seniors with back pain report a moderate-to-extreme mental health impact; **53.3%** report any level of mental health impact.
- Depression or anxiety from back pain is elevated in early senior years: **17.3%** of those aged 61–70 report depression or anxiety linked to back pain, rising to **18.6% among women** in this age group – one of the highest rates of any age band in the survey.
- Depression and anxiety from back pain peak in the lead-up to the senior years, at **14.0% of those aged 51–60** (17.1% of women in that decade), before the burden becomes increasingly expressed through chronicity and functional decline in older age.
- **CLINICAL RESEARCH (de Luca, CQUniversity)**: ACA-funded research found depressive symptoms are associated with a heightened risk of future back pain onset in older adults, and that older people with chronic primary low back pain show significantly greater declines in memory, attention and processing speed than those without it.
- **12.3%** of seniors report struggling with depression or anxiety as a life impact – higher than women of any age (11.2%) and men of any age (9.3%).
- Despite lower reported distress scores, high chronicity, mobility loss, sleep disruption and quality-of-life impact suggest a long-term burden that may be normalised with age.
- ACA MEMBER DATA: 55% of chiropractors report the majority of their senior patients exhibit fear avoidance behaviour – the highest of any age group.
- Pharmacological approaches and advise against routine medication as a primary or long-term response.

CHIROPRACTIC CONSULTATION & OUTCOMES FOR OLDER AUSTRALIANS

- **49.8%** of seniors have consulted a chiropractor – the highest lifetime consultation rate of any age group. Among senior back pain sufferers, 51.7% have consulted a chiropractor.
- Among all Australians who consulted a chiropractor specifically for back pain, **77.3%** reported improvement and **39.2%** significantly improved or totally resolved their condition.
- **10.1%** of chiropractic patients reported additional mental health and wellbeing benefits beyond pain relief.
- Seniors report the lowest cost barrier to chiropractic of any age group (**38.5%**), likely reflecting concession access and different income structures. Nationally, 15.0% of existing chiropractic patients report attending less frequently due to cost pressures.

BACK PAIN ACROSS THE SENIOR YEARS – KEY METRICS BY AGE

Age band	BP lifetime	Chronic pain	MH mod+	QoL often/always	Consulted chiro
61–70	88.2%	41.7%	37.8%	28.3%	
71–80	84.9%	42.2%	31.1%	22.2%	
81+	89.8%	56.8%	15.9%	18.2%	
All seniors 61+	87.3%	48.3%	30.3%	28.7%	49.8%

Note: All mental health and chronicity percentages are calculated as a proportion of back pain sufferers within each age group. Prevalence is of all surveyed in that age group. The lower reported MH impact at 81+ most likely reflects normalisation of pain and lower emotional-engagement benchmarks rather than genuine wellbeing.

A NOTABLE GENDER DIVIDE AMONG OLDER AUSTRALIANS

- Among Australians aged 71–80, **51.1% of women have chronic pain compared with 32.6% of men** – an 18.5 percentage-point gap and the largest of any age/gender comparison in the survey.
- Women aged 71–80 also show much higher any-level mental health impact (53.2% vs 37.2% for men).
- In the 61–70 group, men's back pain prevalence overtakes women's (93.2% vs 83.1%) – a reversal not seen in younger cohorts.
- Older women with disc injuries are three times more likely than men to rate their pain as severe (35.5% vs 11.8%).

CLINICAL RESEARCH – BACK PAIN & OLDER AUSTRALIANS

- **Back Complaints in the Elderly: Chiropractic – Australia (BACE:C-A)** – funded from an ACA Grant, 12-month longitudinal study conducted at CQUniversity by Associate Professor Katie de Luca, investigating the clinical course and predictors of disability in older adults with low back pain.
- Chronic primary low back pain (CPLBP) in older people is associated with concurrent musculoskeletal pain, loss of mobility, frailty, falls, urinary incontinence, poor sleep and moderate-to-severe disability.
- There is strong evidence that depressive symptoms raise the risk of future back pain onset, and a systematic review co-authored by A/Prof de Luca found older people with CPLBP had significantly greater declines in long-term memory, selective attention, processing speed and executive function than older adults without CPLBP.
- Community-dwelling older women with spinal pain have significantly poorer health status, lower physical and mental quality-of-life scores and decreased functional ability than women without spinal pain, with over 50% reporting two or more comorbidities.
- **COMEBACK study:** A/Prof de Luca's exercise feasibility study for older people with back pain and comorbid conditions found participants achieved increased functional capacity and aerobic stamina, decreased depression and anxiety, and reduced frailty – all leading to improved quality of life.
- Findings are consistent with the WHO 2023 guideline for non-surgical management of CPLBP, which endorses interventions including spinal manipulation and warns against bed rest. The ACA has invested over \$2.4 million to advance chiropractic research.

HEALTHY AGEING, PREVENTION & THE BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL MODEL

- The data shows a clear arc: back pain becomes more chronic, less resolved and more functionally limiting with each decade of life. Earlier intervention at any age reduces the likelihood of chronicity.
- For older Australians already living with persistent pain, consistent, evidence-based care focused on maintaining mobility, managing fear avoidance and supporting independence offers the most clinically meaningful pathway.
- The ACA's CQUniversity / MindSpot feasibility study demonstrated that when online psychological pain management is integrated with routine chiropractic care, all outcomes – physical and psychological – improve. This biopsychosocial approach is particularly relevant for older Australians.
- 6.1 million Australians are affected by MSDs, costing the economy \$55.1 billion annually (Deloitte Access Economics) in direct health costs, lost productivity and reduced quality of life.

ACA MEDIA SPOKESPERSONS – NATIONAL & ALL STATES & TERRITORIES

Dr Billy Chow – President, ACA – National & South Australia

Dr Billy Chow, President of the Australian Chiropractors Association, graduated as a chiropractor from RMIT University in 1998. He serves as a Lecturer and ACC Program Coordinator (Diploma) at the Australian Chiropractic College, Adelaide, and runs a healthcare business consultancy providing practitioners with personalised business support and mentorship.

Associate Professor Katie de Luca – Lead Researcher, BACE:C-A Study (CQUniversity)

Katie de Luca PhD is a chiropractor and Associate Professor at CQUniversity and a member of the Australian Chiropractors Association. Her primary research focus is the epidemiology and management of musculoskeletal disorders across the lifespan, with particular expertise in older adults and healthy ageing. She was second author on the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021 low back pain estimates (Lancet Rheumatology), which showed global low back pain prevalence and disability peaked in older adults (80–84 years). A/Prof de Luca has more than 60 peer-reviewed publications and sits on the WHO Rehabilitation Programme through the World Federation of Chiropractic.

Dr David McNaughton

Dr David McNaughton (PhD Psychology) is a clinician academic, chiropractor, and Senior Lecturer at CQUniversity, where he teaches and researches at the intersection of musculoskeletal health, psychology, and healthcare innovation. Alongside academia, David directs a multidisciplinary allied health practice, bringing real world clinical insight to his work. His research focuses on pain, mental health, burnout, and integrating psychologically informed care into musculoskeletal practice, with a strong passion for advancing person centred healthcare.

Dr David Cahill – Vice President – National & Victoria

ACA Vice President Dr David Cahill has been a registered, practicing chiropractor since 1991, in the Malvern East area of Melbourne since 1998. He loves helping people of all ages, from newborn babies and toddlers to those in their more senior years, and is very active in post-graduate education.

Dr Damian Kristof – National & Victoria

Nutritionist, Naturopath and Chiropractor, Dr Damian Kristof is a highly sought-after presenter and speaker in the wellness industry with 30 years of experience, in high demand for his in-depth knowledge of the body, nervous system and food functions.

Dr Kim Lie Jom – National & NSW

Dr Kim Lie Jom has been a registered and practicing chiropractor in NSW for 30 years. A Board Director and proud member of the ACA, he holds several key positions within the organisation including Public Education, Audit and Risk, and the Eastern Regional Committee, and is a dedicated member of the Australian Spinal Research Foundation (ASRF).

Dr Michelle Ronan – Victoria

Michelle has been a registered chiropractor since graduating from RMIT in 2005 and has practiced in the Albert Park area since 2010. She loves helping people of all ages and stages of life on their health journey and is currently completing a Master's through RMIT.

Dr Ashley Dent – Tasmania

Dr Dent graduated from Macquarie University in 2010. He chairs the ACA Public Engagement Committee and was recognised with a Meritorious Service Award from the ACA in 2023. He has a keen passion for helping people improve their long-standing (chronic) back and neck pain through exercise and rehabilitation.

Dr Adam Smith – Queensland

Dr Adam Smith has over 22 years of experience in family-based chiropractic care. With a special interest in family health and wellness, he works with local community groups, charities, workplaces and schools, and is currently working to expand chiropractic access in regional and rural areas across six states and territories.

Dr Joshua Tymms – Western Australia

Dr Joshua Tymms is a registered chiropractor with two decades of clinical experience, having graduated from Murdoch University in 2006. He holds dual Master's degrees in Public Health and Business Administration and is the founder of Chiro Van, a mobile healthcare service improving access to chiropractic care across the community.

Dr Ali Young – Western Australia

Dr Ali Young is a chiropractor with over 23 years' experience working specifically with families, children and women. An advocate for working mothers and author of *Work. Mama. Life* (2022), she is a sought-after speaker and has written for most major newspapers around Australia.

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