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WORKSPACE WEEK 19–25 OCTOBER 2026

Cost of living keeps women in pain at work: New survey finds 54% can't afford to take time off to heal

A new national survey to evaluate the impact of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSDs) or injuries on Australian workers released for national *WorkSpace Week 2026* (19–25 October), found that women were more likely than men to experience WMSD pain and injury; were less likely to seek treatment, and more likely to “push through pain”.

The national survey, *Impact of Work-related Musculoskeletal Disorders or Injuries on Australians 2026* of 1,056 participants, commissioned by the Australian Chiropractors Association (ACA) and conducted by independent research firm Pureprofile, found that the gap between women and men reporting WMSD pain or injury has widened since 2023.

The Pureprofile 2026 survey of Australians who've worked at some point in their lives (current workers, retirees and others not currently in paid work), found that since 2023, women experiencing WMSD pain or injury increased from 76% to 79% compared to a decrease in men, down from 77% to 73%, while 87% of women currently working reported experiencing WMSD pain or injury compared to 80% of men.

The survey determined that WMSD pain starts earlier for women with 92% of working women aged 18 to 24, and 85% of women aged 25 to 30 reporting experiencing WMSD pain or injury compared to 66% of men in the same age bracket.

Working fewer hours offers no protection for women with 91% of women working part-time reporting experiencing WMSD pain – equal to women working full-time (91%) well above men (76%) working part-time.

Dr Ali Young, ACA Chair of Women in Chiropractic said, “Financial pressure is playing a big role in women's decisions to manage their health.

“54% of working women with pain said the cost of living had prevented them from taking time off to let an injury heal, compared to 36% of men, while 46% of women said job security concerns prevented them from taking time off compared to 34% of men.”

The Pureprofile survey findings were released as Safe Work Australia (SWA) published the *Key Work Health and Safety Statistics Australia 2026* (October 2026) reporting that musculoskeletal injuries and diseases make up the majority (53%) of serious workers' compensation claims with health care and social assistance an industry where women make up much of the workforce, accounting for the largest share of serious claims (20.9%).

The SWA data shows that in 2024–25, women made up 42.5% (62,100) of Australia's 147,200 serious workers' compensation claims – women's share rising 6.2 percentage points over the past decade and from the age of 45, the serious claim rate for women was higher than men.

Women also lost more time per serious claim, with a median of 9.0 weeks off work compared to 8.0 weeks for men (SWA 2023–24).

However, the Pureprofile survey shows that women are staying silent with 43% reporting they'd never disclosed their WMSD pain to their employer compared to 37% of men; while 56% reported they were too busy to take movement breaks during work hours to help minimise WMSDs compared to 48% of men; and 13% said they worried that taking breaks would make them look less productive compared to 8% of men.

Women were also less likely to make ergonomic changes to the way they work with only 9% of women with pain making ergonomic adjustments compared to 16% of men, and 31% said they did not ask their employer for ergonomic improvements.

The survey also found that women were more likely to have experienced work-related headaches or migraines than men (66% vs 55%), and neck or shoulder pain (66% vs 57%), and 23% of women experience headaches regularly, compared to 13% of men.

“Untreated pain was more common among women for every major pain type, including back pain (45% vs 33%), neck or shoulder pain (49% vs 38%), and headaches or migraines (55% vs 46%),” Dr Young said.

“Of concern is that 34% of women with work-related pain said they rely on over-the-counter medication for pain compared to 22% of men; only 49% said they’d seen a GP compared to 58% of men, and 71% had at least one condition that had not been diagnosed or treated compared to 57% of men.”

“With many women managing pain themselves rather than seeking professional medical diagnosis and treatment, they risk turning a manageable WMSD into a chronic condition with long-term implications to their health and overall quality of life,” she said.

The emotional toll of WMSDs on women was also evident with women reporting that they’re more likely than men to say that their pain often or always contributed to frustration or irritability (29% vs 20%), anxiety (25% vs 18%) and depression or feeling low (21% vs 14%).

With mental health conditions accounting for 17.5% of women’s serious workers’ compensation claims (more than double that of men at 8.2%), mental stress can also impact workers physically leading to a vicious cycle with WMSDs becoming chronic which in turn increases depressive symptoms that then exacerbates WMSDs.

If undiagnosed and untreated, WMSDs can develop into chronic MSDs (pain that lasts more than three months) posing painful long-term implications for workers, their families, their employers’ bottom line and the economy.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) data shows 30.8% of women live with a chronic musculoskeletal condition, compared to 26.8% of men, with musculoskeletal disorders having cost the health system \$17.5 billion in 2024–25 - up \$1.2 billion in a year.

“WMSD risks include poorly executed lifting, pushing, pulling and bending, repetitive movements, poor posture, prolonged driving, desk work and technology use in non-ergonomic workspaces,” Dr Young said.

“According to the 2026 Pureprofile survey, with 44% of women who use a smartphone at work reporting that they did so with their neck bent and head down compared to 31% of men, this reflects data from the Pureprofile survey 2025, *‘The impact of tech neck and neck pain in Australia’*, that found women were 43% more affected by productivity loss from tech neck than men,” said Dr Young.

“Incorrect and non-ergonomic use of technology in the workplace or when working remotely can lead to developing WMSDs including chronic neck and back pain, shoulder stiffness, headaches and other musculoskeletal conditions such as Tension Neck Syndrome or *‘tech neck’* - a debilitating condition common among desk workers,” she said.

Prevention and early intervention provide the best protection against WMSDs including modifying risk factors to improve workers’ posture; promoting regular exercise and breaks, stretching and strengthening; establishing ergonomic workstations; implementing task-specific changes and equipment modifications; implementing ongoing education in manual handling/lifting techniques; and organisational change to balance work hours and workloads to improve workplace culture that can minimise mental stress.

“Simple changes to how we work can help minimise the risks of WMSDs including setting up workstations properly, taking regular movement breaks, and seeking treatment early rather than reaching for a painkiller,” Dr Young said.

“By taking a proactive approach, employers can help prevent chronic conditions by making it easier for women to speak up, take breaks and take time off to recover from work-related injuries,” she said.

Employers and workers are encouraged to join the *WorkSpace Week* movement by reviewing workplace safety controls, managing modifiable risk factors and encouraging workers to disclose WMSDs and seek early diagnosis, treatment, rest and rehabilitation to minimise the impact of WMSDs.

Free resources, including the *WorkSpace Week* Checklist, exercise posters, factsheets and podcasts, are available at workspaceweek.org.au to help Australians **Work Well From Head to Toe**.

- ENDS -

[#WorkSpaceWeek](#) [#WorkWellFromHeadToToe](#) [#AdjustYourThinking](#) [#SafeWorkMonth](#)

Join the *WorkSpace Week* 2026 movement & register your organisation at workspaceweek.org.au.

INTERVIEW REQUESTS

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- **Media Centre: Download comprehensive journalist notes**, images, footage and more from <https://bit.ly/WSW26-MediaCentre>

- **Download Full Survey Report:** <https://bit.ly/WSW26-WMSD-SURVEY>

JOURNALIST NOTES – WOMEN IN FOCUS

NATIONAL DATA – SAFE WORK AUSTRALIA (KEY WHS STATISTICS 2026)

- Women made **62,100 (42.5%)** of Australia's 147,200 serious workers' compensation claims in 2024–25, and their share has risen **6.2 percentage points** over the past decade.
- From the age of **45**, women's serious claim frequency rate is higher than men's.
- Women lose more time per serious claim: a median of **9.0 weeks** off work, compared to 8.0 weeks for men.
- **Mental health conditions** account for **17.5%** of women's serious claims, more than double the share for men (8.2%).

Health care and social assistance, an industry where women make up much of the workforce, accounts for the largest share of serious claims (**20.9%**).

Safe Work Australia (2026). Key Work Health and Safety Statistics Australia 2026, 12 October 2026. <https://data.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/reports/key-whs-statistics-australia/latest-release>

NATIONAL DATA – AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF HEALTH AND WELFARE

- **30.8%** of women live with a chronic musculoskeletal condition, compared to 26.8% of men (AIHW, 2026).
- Musculoskeletal disorders cost Australia's health system **\$17.5 billion** in 2024–25, up \$1.2 billion in a year (AIHW, October 2026).

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2026). Health system spending on disease and injury in Australia 2024–25. 14 October 2026. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/health-welfare-expenditure/health-system-spending-disease-injury-2024-25/contents/summary>

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IMPACT OF WORK-RELATED MUSCULOSKELETAL DISORDERS ON AUSTRALIAN WOMEN 2026

ABOUT THE PUREPROFILE SURVEY

- National online survey of **1,056 Australians aged 18+ who have worked (541 women, 515 men)**, commissioned by the Australian Chiropractors Association (ACA) and conducted by independent researcher Pureprofile.
- **378 women (70%) are currently working**. 425 women (79%) have experienced work-related pain or injury and form the female "pain sufferer" group.
- All pain and injury figures are **self-reported**. "WMSD" (work-related musculoskeletal disorder) is shorthand for self-reported work-related pain or injury and does not mean a formal diagnosis. Comparisons are with the 2023 WorkSpace Week survey (n=1,001).

KEY FINDINGS

- **79%** of women who have worked have experienced work-related pain or injury (men 73%), rising to **87% of working women** (men 80%).
- **The gap has widened since 2023**, when women and men reported WMSDs at similar rates (76% and 77%).
- **50%** of working women with pain regularly keep working when they feel they should rest (men 37%).
- **71%** of women with pain have at least one condition that has not been diagnosed or treated (men 57%).

THE TOLL ON MENTAL HEALTH AND QUALITY OF LIFE

- Women with work-related pain are more likely than men to say it often or always contributes to: frustration or irritability (**29%** vs 20%); reduced patience or tolerance (**27%** vs 17%); reduced motivation (**27%** vs 19%); anxiety (**25%** vs 18%); and depression or feeling low (**21%** vs 14%).
- **28%** of women say pain often or always affects their quality of life (men 22%).

- ◉ **21%** of women experience regular workplace stress (men 13%)

COST OF LIVING AND JOB SECURITY

- ◉ **54%** of working women who pushed through pain couldn't afford to lose income (men 42%).
- ◉ **Two in three (65%)** working women with pain say the cost of living has affected at least one decision about their pain (men 55%). Working women with pain are more likely than men to have:
 - not taken time off to let an injury heal (**54%** vs 36%);
 - kept working despite pain (**51%** vs 40%);
 - not sought medical treatment (**48%** vs 36%); and
 - not asked for ergonomic equipment (**31%** vs 24%).
- ◉ **46%** of working women with pain have not taken time off to heal because of job security concerns (men 34%).
- ◉ Women in their thirties push through most: **51%** of working women with pain aged 31 to 40 work through it regularly (men 36%; indicative, small bases).

PAIN STARTS EARLY – AND PART-TIME WORK OFFERS NO PROTECTION

- ◉ **92%** of working women aged 18 to 24 have experienced work-related pain.
- ◉ **85%** of women aged 25 to 30 have experienced work-related pain, compared with 66% of men the same age.
- ◉ **91%** of women employed part-time have experienced work-related pain, the same as women working full-time (91%) and well above men working part-time (76%).
- ◉ Working women are **more than twice as likely** as working men to work part-time or casually (41% vs 18%).
- ◉ **93%** of women working more than one job have experienced work-related pain.

HEADACHES, NECK PAIN AND BACK PAIN

- ◉ Women are more likely than men to have experienced work-related **headaches or migraines (66% vs 55%)** and **neck or shoulder pain (66% vs 57%)**.
- ◉ Women are more likely to experience pain **regularly**: back pain 29% vs 22%, neck or shoulder pain 28% vs 20%, and headaches or migraines 23% vs 13%.
- ◉ **45%** of women experience at least one type of work-related pain regularly (men 33%).
- ◉ Headaches or migraines are the condition with the greatest impact for **33%** of women with pain in the past year.
- ◉ Since 2023, work-related headaches or migraines among women have risen from **58% to 66%**, and regular back pain from **25% to 29%**.
- ◉ Women are more likely to name **stress (29% vs 16%)**, **repetitive movements (26% vs 16%)** and **prolonged sitting (26% vs 19%)** as causes of their pain.

MANAGING PAIN ALONE

- ◉ Women with work-related musculoskeletal pain are:
 - **More likely** than men to rely on over-the-counter medication (34% vs 22%) and;
 - **Less likely** to see a GP (49% vs 58%), have a condition diagnosed (56% vs 63%) or make ergonomic adjustments (9% vs 16%).
- ◉ **34%** of women with pain have never sought a diagnosis or treatment for any of it (men 28%).
- ◉ Untreated pain is more common among women for every major pain type: **back pain (45% vs 33%)**, **neck or shoulder pain (49% vs 38%)** and **headaches or migraines (55% vs 46%)**.
- ◉ **46%** of women with pain say at least one condition is ongoing or affects them daily (men 41%).

WORKPLACES AND PREVENTION

- ◉ **43%** of women with pain never told their employer (men 37%).
- ◉ **56%** of women say they are too busy to take movement breaks (men 48%), and **13%** worry breaks will make them look less productive (men 8%).
- ◉ Only **9%** of women are very confident they know how to reduce their risk of work-related pain (men 14%).
- ◉ **Tech neck**: 44% of women who use a smartphone at work do so with their neck bent and head down (men 31%).
- ◉ **88%** of women whose job involves computer or desk work have experienced work-related pain.

WHO IS MOST AFFECTED

- ◉ **Healthcare workers**: 98% of women in clinical healthcare roles have experienced work-related pain, including all 41 women currently working in clinical healthcare (indicative, small base).

- ⦿ **Young women:** 92% of working women aged 18 to 24 have experienced work-related pain.

STATE BY STATE – WOMEN

New South Wales: Sydney women hardest hit and the widest gender gap

- ⦿ **83%** of women in NSW have experienced work-related pain or injury (139 of 168), compared with 71% of men – the **widest gender gap (+12 points)** of the five largest states.
- ⦿ **92% of women in Sydney** (71 of 77) have experienced a WMSD – the highest rate of any metro or regional group – compared with 69% of Sydney men (a 23-point gap).
- ⦿ In regional NSW the pattern reverses: 75% of women compared with 79% of men.

Victoria: consistently high across the state

- ⦿ **81%** of Victorian women have experienced work-related pain or injury (94 of 116), compared with 77% of men.
- ⦿ Rates are almost identical for women in Melbourne (**81%**) and regional Victoria (**80%**).

Queensland: Brisbane women most affected

- ⦿ **75%** of Queensland women have experienced work-related pain or injury (86 of 115), compared with 71% of men.
- ⦿ **79%** of women in Brisbane (27 of 34), compared with 73% of women in regional Queensland (59 of 81).

Western Australia: Perth women among the hardest hit

- ⦿ **81%** of WA women have experienced work-related pain or injury (52 of 64), compared with 76% of men.
- ⦿ **86% of women in Perth** (48 of 56) – the second-highest rate of any capital city after Sydney women.

South Australia: the only large state where men are ahead

- ⦿ **70%** of South Australian women have experienced work-related pain or injury (30 of 43), compared with 74% of men – the only one of the five largest states where women report lower rates.
- ⦿ **63%** of women in Adelaide (20 of 32). In regional SA, 10 of 11 women experienced a WMSD (indicative/small base).

Tasmania (indicative)

- ⦿ **75%** of Tasmanian women (15 of 20), compared with 63% of men (5 of 8).

ACT and Northern Territory (indicative)

- ⦿ **60%** of women in the ACT and NT combined (9 of 15). In the ACT, women and men report the same rate (57%).

State / area	Women with a WMSD	Men with a WMSD	Gap (pts)
NSW (total)	83% (139 of 168)	71%	+12
Sydney	92% (71 of 77)	69%	+23
Regional NSW	75% (68 of 91)	79%	-4
VIC (total)	81% (94 of 116)	77%	+4
Melbourne	81% (57 of 70)	78%	+3
Regional VIC	80% (37 of 46)	73%	+7
QLD (total)	75% (86 of 115)	71%	+4
Brisbane	79% (27 of 34)	75%	+4
Regional QLD	73% (59 of 81)	64%	+9
WA (total)	81% (52 of 64)	76%	+5
Perth	86% (48 of 56)	76%	+10
Regional WA*	50% (4 of 8)*	67%*	-
SA (total)	70% (30 of 43)	74%	-4
Adelaide	63% (20 of 32)	76%	-13
Regional SA*	91% (10 of 11)*	67%*	-
TAS (total)*	75% (15 of 20)*	63%*	+12
ACT & NT (combined)*	60% (9 of 15)*	67%*	-7
AUSTRALIA	79% (425 of 541)	73%	+6

Shows % of women (and men) who have experienced a WMSD, with the number of women in brackets (number with a WMSD of number surveyed). Gap = women minus men, in percentage points. *Fewer than 30 women surveyed – treat as indicative.

STATE BY STATE

Measure	NSW (n=330)	VIC (n=279)	QLD (n=212)	WA (n=101)	SA (n=82)	TAS* (n=28)	ACT & NT* (n=24)	Australia (n=1,056)
WOMEN IN FOCUS								
Base: women surveyed	n=168	n=116	n=115	n=64	n=43	n=20	n=15	n=541
Women: have experienced a WMSD	83% (139)	81% (94)	75% (86)	81% (52)	70% (30)	75%* (15)	60%* (9)	79% (425)
Men: have experienced a WMSD	71% (115)	77% (125)	71% (69)	76% (28)	74% (29)	63%* (5)	67%* (6)	73% (377)
Gender gap (women minus men, pts)	+12	+4	+4	+5	-4	+12*	-7*	+6
Women in the capital city with a WMSD	Sydney 92% (71)	Melbourne 81% (57)	Brisbane 79% (27)	Perth 86% (48)	Adelaide 63% (20)	Hobart 80%* (8)	Canberra & Darwin 60%* (9)	Metro 82% (240)
Women in regional areas with a WMSD	75% (68)	80% (37)	73% (59)	50%* (4)	91%* (10)	70%* (7)	–	75% (185)
ALL RESPONDENTS (WOMEN AND MEN)								
Have experienced a WMSD	77% (254)	78% (219)	73% (155)	79% (80)	72% (59)	71%* (20)	63%* (15)	76% (802)
Have a WMSD (% of those currently working)	82% (207)	87% (174)	80% (111)	88% (63)	80% (43)	84%* (16)	75%* (12)	83% (626)
Experienced a WMSD in past 12 months	75% (246)	77% (216)	71% (150)	76% (77)	67% (55)	64%* (18)	58%* (14)	73% (776)
Regularly experience work-related pain	36% (118)	42% (117)	42% (89)	44% (44)	34% (28)	43%* (12)	25%* (6)	39% (414)
Confident they know how to reduce their risk	56% (185)	48% (135)	60% (127)	52% (53)	62% (51)	68%* (19)	63%* (15)	55% (585)
Age group with the highest WMSD rate (% of that age group)	18 to 30 (87%)	31 to 40 (88%)	51 to 60 (89%)	31 to 40 (91%)*	31 to 40 (94%)*	51 to 60 (89%)*	31 to 40 (83%)*	31 to 40 (86%)
Base: pain sufferers	n=254	n=219	n=155	n=80	n=59	n=20	n=15	n=802
Pain has affected their mental health	71% (181)	76% (166)	66% (102)	79% (63)	68% (40)	65%* (13)	80%* (12)	72% (577)
Mental health significantly or extremely affected	19% (49)	22% (48)	10% (15)	19% (15)	19% (11)	30%* (6)	40%* (6)	19% (150)
Pain often or always affects quality of life	24% (61)	21% (47)	26% (41)	36% (29)	19% (11)	40%* (8)	33%* (5)	25% (202)
Never sought diagnosis or treatment for any condition	31% (79)	32% (70)	27% (42)	35% (28)	34% (20)	20%* (4)	33%* (5)	31% (248)
Saw a GP for their pain	49% (124)	53% (115)	59% (92)	60% (48)	56% (33)	50%* (10)	33%* (5)	53% (427)
Never told their employer about pain	38% (97)	34% (74)	48% (75)	44% (35)	49% (29)	30%* (6)	20%* (3)	40% (319)
Base: pain in the past 12 months	n=246	n=216	n=150	n=77	n=55	n=18	n=14	n=776
Took time off work in the past 12 months	48% (119)	53% (115)	48% (72)	45% (35)	47% (26)	44%* (8)	57%* (8)	49% (383)
Most common length of time off (% of those who took time off)	1–2 days (41%)	1–2 days (39%)	1–2 days (44%)	1–2 days (46%)	1–2 days (42%)*	1–2 days and 20+ days 38% each*	3–5 days (50%)*	1–2 days (41%)
Second most common length of time off	3–5 days (24%)	3–5 days (26%)	3–5 days (26%)	3–5 days (23%)	6–10 days (27%)*	3–5 and 6– 10 days (13% each)*	1–2, 6–10, 11–20 and 20+ days (13% each)*	3–5 days (25%)
Base: working pain sufferers	n=207	n=174	n=111	n=63	n=43	n=16	n=12	n=626
Kept working when they felt they should have taken time off	90% (186)	89% (154)	87% (97)	92% (58)	91% (39)	94%* (15)	92%* (11)	89% (560)
Regularly keep working despite pain	44% (91)	39% (68)	43% (48)	51% (32)	44% (19)	50%* (8)	50%* (6)	43% (272)
Cost of living affected at least one decision	62% (128)	63% (110)	54% (60)	65% (41)	53% (23)	63%* (10)	58%* (7)	61% (379)
Base: workplace workers	n=289	n=238	n=160	n=81	n=61	n=24	n=20	n=873
Take movement breaks often or always at the workplace	30% (87)	29% (69)	36% (57)	41% (33)	44% (27)	29%* (7)	30%* (6)	33% (286)

Shows % and number (in brackets) giving each response. n in the column headings is all respondents in each state or territory; the shaded rows show the base for the measures below them. Women in Focus rows are based on women only; the remaining rows cover all respondents, as the survey data tables do not split these measures by both state and gender. *Fewer than 30 respondents – treat as indicative.

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