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New Data Shows Alarming Impact of Back Pain on Australian Women

As part of **National Spinal Health Week (20 - 26 May 2024)**, the Australian Chiropractors Association (ACA) released new findings on the prevalence of back pain due to spine related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), revealing a significant impact on the spinal health of Australian women and suggests overuse of prescribed and over-the-counter medications that are proven to be largely ineffective in treating back pain.

The survey *Impact of Back Pain & Musculoskeletal Injuries in Australia*, an independent national consumer survey conducted by *Pureprofile*, revealed of all back/spine related MSD's, 91.3% of female respondents experienced a back related MSD in their lifetime with 82% experiencing low back pain in the past 12 months.

According to a survey of 1,006 Australian respondents (506 female, 499 male, and 1 non-binary), a total of 6,368 MSDs were reported. Women experienced 52.1% of these MSDs, with the most common being low back pain (81.6%), sprains or strains (75.5%), and mid back pain (70.6%) with 93.7% of regional Australian women and 89.9% of metropolitan women experiencing a MSD.

Women were more likely than men to experience a higher number of MSDs; of the 462 female MSD sufferers, 12% experienced 1 or 2; 28.6% between 3 and 6; 33.8% between 7 and 9; and 27.3% experienced between 10 and 12 MSDs with women 22.5% more likely than men to experience 7-12 MSDs.

Of those, 82.2% of women reported low back pain, with 28% of female sufferers experiencing low back pain weekly; 12% daily; 18% monthly; 15% occasionally (one every few months) and 15% seldom, and 33.7% reported that their MSD affected their movement or their ability to carry out daily activities.

This past year, Australian women experienced higher rates of back pain than men. 25.5% more women suffered from upper back pain, 19.7% more from 'Chronic Primary Low Back Pain' (CPLBP), and 5% more from low or mid back pain. Regular pain was reported by 41% of women in the lower back, 34% of mid-back, and 32% of upper back. Additionally, 40% of female low back pain sufferers developed a chronic condition.

86% of female respondents reported experiencing low, mid and upper back pain, or 'Chronic Primary Low Back Pain' (CPLBP). Also known as non-specific low back pain, CPLBP is when people experience persistent symptoms beyond three months that often are not caused by any particular condition and are classified as having a non-sinister, non-pathological cause.

Dr Ali Young, a chiropractor, author, Chair of ACA's Women in Chiropractic, speaker, former Vice President (CAAWA), mother of two, with extensive experience treating and advocating for the spinal health of women.

Dr Young, said, "Significantly, the survey showed nearly half (49.4%) of all female MSD sufferers failed to seek a medical diagnosis. This issue was even more pronounced among women with low back pain (the most common MSD experienced by Australian women), with 61.1% not seeking a medical diagnosis. These figures suggest official data may underrepresent the true prevalence of MSDs affecting Australian women," she said.

The *World Health Organisation (WHO) guideline for non-surgical management of chronic primary low back pain (CPLBP) in adults in primary and community care settings (Dec 2023)*, developed from in depth research by a world-wide range of neuro-musculoskeletal health practitioners including chiropractors; recommends optimising the clinical management of people with CPLBP as a priority for WHO Member States.

"Although the WHO research determined that in some cases, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications may assist sufferers in the short-term; in line with the University of Sydney's study (*Lancet medical journal*, 23 June 2023), the WHO recommends against the commonly prescribed use of opioids and paracetamol to

treat low back pain as these medications have proven largely ineffective and come with a range of significant associated risks and side effects,” said Dr Young.

“Alarmingly, what the survey revealed was that 81% of all low back pain sufferers opted to treat the symptoms with over the counter or prescription medications rather than seek drug-free treatment. While medication can be avoided with appropriate diagnosis and treatment, of concern, is that women reported the greatest use of pain relief medication for low back pain (82.2% compared to 79.0% of men) with 14% taking it daily, 13% frequently and 13.5% said they often used medication to relieve back pain,” she said.

The top five triggers or causes reported for Australian women’s back pain were aging (29.2%), lifting/pulling/pushing (27.9%), computer use at work (19.3%), desk/seated work (17.7%) and stress (16.6%).

The data also revealed that 95.5% of female workers who engaged in occupations that involve a combination of sitting and standing reported the highest prevalence of MSDs followed by 93.3% of women whose professions included a mix of sitting, standing, and physical activity.

Workers with seated or desk-only roles accounted for 91% of reported MSDs while female workers in sedentary occupations exhibited the highest prevalence of back pain at 89.1%, whereas women who were engaged in highly active roles reported a comparatively lower prevalence of 83.3%.

Of the women who are not part of the workforce, 82.6% reported experiencing back pain with 89.7% of full time mothers or homemakers and 86.8% of retired women all reported experiencing back pain.

Significantly, the survey results also reflect the importance of exercise in preventing low back pain with women who have a highly-active lifestyle outside work and who undertook daily exercise reporting the lowest prevalence of back pain (76%) compared to 87.4% of women who were ‘somewhat active’ and undertook only light physical activity - a mix of standing and walking.

The survey data also suggests that weight can influence the likelihood of men or women experiencing back pain with 95% of very overweight and 90% of underweight respondents suffering back pain compared to 81% of “ideal” weight respondents and 86% of “bit over weight”.

Women reported 26% more adverse effects from their MSDs compared to men including sleep interference (32%), increased irritability (29%), significant pain (26%), loss of sleep (24%), reduced ability to exercise (23%), difficulty performing household chores, difficulty concentrating (20%) and impacts on mental health and wellbeing, (15%). Women were also 54% more likely to experience difficulty concentrating, 36% more likely to have mental health issues, and 28% more likely to suffer sleep disruption as a result of back pain.

“The implications of unresolved back pain for women of all ages can be debilitating, restricting their ability to participate in family, social, and work activities, and have a negative impact on their mental health and overall wellbeing so its vital sufferers seek appropriate healthcare options that not only limit the use of medications but treat the cause of their condition including recommending exercise to help prevent reoccurrence.

Of the 45% of female respondents who had consulted a chiropractor, 81% gained relief from back pain.

“The WHO’s analysis shows that MSDs cause the most persistent pain, with low back pain being the leading cause of global disability across all ages and genders with prevalence and disability consistently higher in women and older people. Together, these survey results form a compelling case for a proactive, strategic response to how Australian women approach back pain,” Dr Young said.

“With its findings focused on individualised holistic healthcare, the WHO’s research aligns with the heart of ACA’s chiropractic philosophy - that patient education and self-care strategies, tailored exercise programs and physical therapies including chiropractic spinal manipulative therapy, and massage; can provide effective, evidence-based holistic drug-free solutions for back pain sufferers,” she said.

“With over 400,000 chiropractic healthcare consultations helping to create well-adjusted Australians every week, ACA chiropractors continue to play an important role in improving our spinal health,” said Dr Young.

With prevention the best protection from back pain, women can download free *Factsheets*, *Stretching Guide: Poster* and the *Straighten Up app* from www.spinalhealthweek.org.au.

ENDS

INTERVIEW REQUESTS

A variety of spokespersons including case studies are available for interview.

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For information on **Spinal Health Week 2024** visit spinalhealthweek.org.au or call ACA on **02 8844 0400**

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<https://bit.ly/SHW-24>

REPORT: <https://bit.ly/SHW-Impact-of-Back-Pain>

THE IMPACT OF BACK PAIN & MUSCULOSKELETAL INJURIES IN AUSTRALIA

An Independent National Consumer Survey Conducted By Pureprofile

1006 Respondents ⦿ 506 Female ⦿ 499 Male ⦿ 1 Non-Binary

- **907 Reported a MSD to their spine/back in their lifetime:** 462 Female; 444 Male; 1 Non-Binary
 - **891 Experienced a MSD during past 12 months:** 455 Female; 435 Male; 1 Non-Binary
 - **854 Reported “low, mid, upper or non-specific” back pain:** 437 Female; 416 Male; 1 Non-Binary
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- ⦿ **90.2% of respondents reported experiencing specific back/spine related MSD in their lifetime.** 91.3% of female respondents and 89.0% of male respondents.
 - **98.2% of all back/spine related MSD sufferers** experienced a back related MSD pain/injury during past 12 months (98.5% of female and 98.0% male).
 - **50.4% of all MSD Sufferers have never sought a medical diagnosis for their back pain.**
 - 93.7% of regional Australian women and 89.9% of metropolitan women reported experiencing MSD
 - ⦿ **88.6% of total respondents** experienced a back related MSD pain/injury during past 12 months (89.9% of female and 87.2% male).
 - ⦿ **80.3% of respondents reported that their households have occupants who experience back pain.**
 - 65.9% reported themselves, 28.6% reported their partner, 6% their children and 6.3% a flatmate and 19.7% reported “no one in my household”.
 - According to the ABS (Oct 2023), Australia had 10.4million households in June 2023 indicating 8.35m Australian households are likely to have occupants who experience back pain.
 - ⦿ **85% of respondents reported experiencing “back pain – low, mid, upper or ‘non-specific’”.**
 - 86% of female respondents experienced low, mid, upper or ‘non-specific’ back pain.
 - 83% of male respondents experienced low, mid, upper or ‘non-specific’ back pain.
 - According to the ABS (April 2024), Australia’s adult population at 30 June 2023 was 19.62 million indicating that approximately 16.4 million Australians could experience back pain (low, mid, upper or non-specific).
 - ⦿ **Only 40% of low-back pain sufferers received a medical diagnosis – 42% of men and 39% of women. 60% of low-back pain sufferers have not sought a medical diagnosis.**
 - ⦿ 75% of respondents with back pain are aged 18-60 which represents the peak working age.
 - ⦿ **Of the respondents who reported experiencing low, mid, upper or non-specific back pain, ‘low-back pain’ was the most prevalent (80.6%) with 82.2% of all female respondents and 79% of all males** suffering low-back pain.
 - ⦿ 6,368 individual MSDS were reported by 907 of 1006 respondents. 3,318 (52%) by women and 3042 (48%) by men
 - ⦿ The top three MSDs reported were **Low-back pain (80.6%), Neck pain (67.9%) and Mid-back pain (66.3%).**

- Over the past 12 months:
 - **82% of women experienced low-back pain** with 28% of sufferers experiencing low-back pain weekly, 12% daily, 18% monthly, 15% occasionally (one every few months) and 15% seldom.
 - **78% of men experienced low-back pain** with 21% of sufferers experiencing it weekly, 14% daily, 17% monthly, 16% occasionally (one every few months) and 17% seldom.
- **Individuals** with a highly-active lifestyle outside work who undertook daily exercise reported the lowest prevalence of back pain (77%) compared to 86% of individuals who are only 'somewhat active' undertaking light physical activity (mix of standing and walking).
 - **Women** with a highly-active lifestyle outside work who undertook daily exercise reported the lowest prevalence of back pain (76%) compared to 87.4% of women who were 'somewhat active' and undertook only light physical activity - a mix of standing and walking.
 - **Men** with an 'active lifestyle' (undertake physically exertive activities; on their feet most of the day) reported the greatest prevalence of back pain (85%) with men with a 'highly-active' lifestyle having the lowest prevalence (78%).
- The data suggests weight can influence the likelihood of experiencing back pain with **95% of very overweight** and **90% of underweight** respondents suffering back pain compared to **81% of "ideal" weight** respondents and 86% of "bit over weight".
- 51.5% of all respondents experienced 7-12 MSDs. 61% of female and 47.1% of male respondents.
- 23% of low-back pain sufferers required time off work, 53% required treatment and 6% were no longer able to work.
- 28% of LB pain lasts for 1-3 days with 19% of sufferers experiencing ongoing pain.
- **81% of low-back pain sufferers take pain relief medication to manage their symptoms. Of those, 13% take pain relief medication on a daily basis, while 12% use it frequently (3+ days per week).**
- **28% of all respondents (285) reported experiencing moderate low-back pain, pain which interferes significantly with daily life with 35% of low-back pain sufferers classifying the pain as moderate and 8% as severe.**
- **93.2% of all workers who "sit AND stand"** reported a musculoskeletal condition followed by 92.7% of workers who have a job which combines "sitting, standing and physical work".
- **95.5% of Female workers** engaged in occupations that involve a combination of sitting and standing reported the highest prevalence of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).
- **86.9% of workers who "stand"** have a greater prevalence of back pain, even when combined with sitting or physical work.
- **Workers undertaking repetitive movements and standing for prolonged periods** of time reported highest incidence of back pain:
 - **Female workers in sedentary occupations exhibited the highest prevalence of back pain at 89.1%**, whereas women engaged in highly active roles reported a lower prevalence of 83.3%.
 - **58.2% of Back Pain sufferers indicated work contributed to their back pain.**
 - **56.1% of Back Pain sufferers indicated home contributed to their back pain.**
- 17.9% of MSDs reported required workers compensation.
- **Chronic Pain**
 - **30% of back pain (low, mid, upper or non-specific) sufferers reported their back pain became chronic (persisting for greater than 3 months or constantly recurring).**
 - **18% of total respondents classified their MSD as chronic.**
 - **Low-back pain was the most reported chronic condition reported by all respondents (37%).**
- 33.7% of all reported MSDs affected respondents' movement or their ability to carry out daily activities.
- The survey highlighted that community understanding of what constitutes "back pain or discomfort to muscles, ligament, tendons, joints, spine and/or bone" is lacking. When initially asked if the respondent had experienced back pain or discomfort to their muscles, ligaments, tendons, joints, spine or bones, only 66% of respondents answered yes. But when asked if they had experienced 12 specific types of back pain or injuries, 90% answered that they had in fact experienced back pain or discomfort to their muscles, ligaments, tendons, joints, spine or bones.

Chiropractic: Key Findings

- **44% of all respondents (441) and 43% of MSD sufferers (426) reported consulting a chiropractor.**
 - 44.5% of women (225) and 43.3% of men (216)
- 80.3% of patients reported gaining relief when they consulted a chiropractor. 10.2% noted minimal improvement and 9.5% saw no improvement.
- 41% reported their back pain either significantly improved or totally resolved through chiropractic healthcare. 18% reported a partial improvement.
- **81% of female patients reported relief when consulting a chiropractor for back pain.**
- **79% of male patients reported relief when consulting a chiropractor for back pain.**

DOWNLOAD REPORT: <https://bit.ly/SHW-Impact-of-Back-Pain>

ACA MEDIA SPOKESPERSONS

Note: Case studies are also available on request.

Dr Ali Young – Western Australia

Dr Ali Young is a Chiropractor with over 20 years' experience working specifically with families, children and women. She has owned practices and worked in both Western Australia and Queensland, and loves taking care of those children that love that extra jolt of frivolity, playfulness and joy in their healthcare. She is an advocate for Working Mothers, with her book, *Work. Mama. Life* widely received upon its publication in 2022. She is a mother of two, and now works with women in her Holistic Health Business space, combining these two great loves with her chiropractic work. She is a sought after speaker, MC, and strategist for working mothers in the allied health space who both own businesses, and want to live large whilst avoiding burnout. She has written for most major newspapers around Australia, has a podcast "Work Mama Life" with nearly 20,000 downloads, and provides support in the online space for women and mothers. She has been a chiropractic patient since 15 years of age, and thinks there is no greater gift than providing the support families need to allow their health to shine. Dr Ali Young is the Chair of ACA's Women in Chiropractic group.

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. Michelle's passion lies in helping people's bodies perform better to allow them to get more out of life, whether that be to enhance sports performance, rehabilitation of chronic conditions, during pregnancy or to support general health and wellbeing. Michelle loves helping people of all ages and stages of life on their health journey. Michelle previously sat on the Victorian branch of the CAA (now the Australian Chiropractors Association) and is currently completing a masters through RMIT.

Dr Aimee Mason – New South Wales

Dr Aimee Mason is a dedicated chiropractor based in Sydney. Dr Mason is driven by her passion for holistic patient care. Aimee's practice focusses on helping individuals achieve pain-free and optional functionality through postural excellence. As a firm believer in the importance of posture for overall health and wellbeing, Aimee is dedicated to educating her patients and tailoring chiropractic techniques to suit their individual needs. Beyond her practice, Aimee is actively involved in supporting the chiropractic profession. Her commitment to chiropractic and her community reflects her core values of compassion and healthcare optimisation.

NATIONAL SPINAL HEALTH WEEK 2024

National Spinal Health Week (20-26 May 2024) is the initiative of the Australian Chiropractors Association (ACA). ACA has conducted national Spinal Health Week for more than 25 years. It is Australia's longest running, and award-winning national health awareness campaign dedicated to improving the spinal health of Australians of all ages.

Annually, the national campaign focusses on a specific spinal health issue while promoting the importance of maintaining good spinal health to improve overall health and wellbeing. In 2024, the campaign focusses on improving musculoskeletal health to address back pain and the impact it has on 4 in every 5 Australians. ACA is encouraging individuals, the community, businesses and organisations to participate by registering at www.spinalhealthweek.org.au

With the cost of Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs) to the Australian economy exceeding \$55.1 billion annually (including direct health costs, lost productivity and reduced quality of life); with 6.1 million Australians already affected, of which 58% are of working age in peak income earning years (25-64); and, with the growth in musculoskeletal cases projected to be 43% over the next two decades (including older Australians living with spinal health conditions), the health burden on Australians and our economy is significant. By promoting a pro-active approach to improving spinal health through effective drug-free solutions, national Spinal Health Week 2024 will increase awareness of MSDs that can cause back pain and restrict the quality of life and increase the psychological distress and bodily pain of sufferers.

THE AUSTRALIAN CHIROPRACTORS ASSOCIATION

Established in 1938, the Australian Chiropractors Association (ACA) is the peak body representing chiropractors. The ACA promotes the importance of maintaining spinal health to improve musculoskeletal health through non-invasive, drug-free spinal health and lifestyle advice to help Australians of all ages lead and maintain healthy lives.

The ACA is the premier association for chiropractic in Australia. With around 3,000 members, the ACA is Australia's largest chiropractic health body and has taken a leadership role in promoting the importance of maintaining a healthy spine to improve the overall health and wellbeing of every Australian. ACA develops and promotes professional standards for chiropractors, has invested \$2.2 million into neuromusculoskeletal healthcare, builds evidence-based practice for chiropractic healthcare and actively promotes the importance of spinal health through its annual flagship campaign, national Spinal Health Week.

Every week 400,000 chiropractic healthcare consultations are creating well-adjusted Australians. With so many Australians visiting a chiropractor every week, chiropractors play an important role in improving the spinal health of everyday Australians.

REFERENCES

- ⦿ **WHO guideline for non-surgical management of chronic primary low back pain in adults in primary and community care settings.** Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. <https://www.who.int/news/item/07-12-2023-who-releases-guidelines-on-chronic-low-back-pain#:~:text=LBP%20affects%20life%20quality%20and,accumulate%20less%20wealth%20for%20retirement.>
- ⦿ **University of Sydney - Opioids ineffective for acute low back or neck pain: Study:** <https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/opioids-ineffective-for-acute-low-back-or-neck-pai#:~:text=and%20neck%20pain.-,Opioids%20are%20the%20one%20of%20the%20most%20prescribed%20pain%2Drelief,prescribed%20opioids%20such%20as%20oxycodone>
- ⦿ **TGA decision to reduce paracetamol pack sizes** www.tga.gov.au/news/media-releases/tga-makes-final-decision-reduce-paracetamol-pack-sizes
- ⦿ **World Health Organisation:** <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/musculoskeletal-conditions>
- ⦿ **Musculoskeletal Australia - The rising cost of musculoskeletal conditions:** <https://msk.org.au/a-problem-worth-solving/#:~:text=This%20groundbreaking%20report%20details%20the,and%20reduced%20quality%20of%20life>