

*****CASE STUDIES AVAILABLE*****

Chronic pain an invisible disease accompanied by stigma and social isolation

Consumer advocacy not-for-profit Chronic Pain Australia is releasing the findings of its annual National Pain Survey to mark National Pain Week 2021.

Key findings include:

- More than 50% of people living with chronic pain feel like they are stigmatised because they have chronic pain.
- Regulation has made medication harder to access but 77% of survey respondents find alternative non-pharmacological treatments unaffordable.
- In a silver lining, 67% of survey respondents experienced a benefit from the pandemic pivot to telehealth.

The 2021 National Pain Survey, completed by 2233 people living with chronic pain nation-wide, has found that more than 50% of people living with chronic pain feel like they are stigmatised because they have chronic pain, with people at their place of work doubting their condition as “they do not look like they are in pain” or commenting on their frequent sick days.

Stigma is often linked to social isolation and disconnection of friends and family. A respondent summed up the double whammy of work and social stigma by noting that “Not being able to work full time, people think I’m lazy. Having to miss social events, friends and family think I’m antisocial”.

Almost 50% of survey respondents said that they had experienced difficulty accessing opioid-based pain medication necessary to managing their condition due to the change in government rules around prescribing of opioids. But 77% of respondents also found seeing other healthcare professionals who help with alternative pain management strategies unaffordable, and access in rural and remote regions challenging, leaving many struggling to manage their pain on their own.

However in a silver lining, 67% said that they experienced benefits from using telehealth. In particular, respondents mentioned that they no longer had to miss a GP or other specialist appointment because of not being able to drive due to pain, or distance and costs associated with travel.

President of Chronic Pain Australia Alexandra Hordern said, “The 2021 National Pain Survey has highlighted that people living with chronic pain need better access to health professionals and pain specialists. The telehealth services that became available during 2020 have helped many to access their GPs, specialists and other healthcare professionals more regularly to support them with their ongoing pain management. Survey respondents were also keen users of pain management strategies other than opioid-based medications, but struggle to access and afford those services. This points to a number of clear ways in which the 3.4 million Australians living with some form of chronic pain can be helped to manage their condition and participate more fully in life.”

National Pain Survey 2021 report attached. More findings summarised overleaf.

Key figures from the 2021 National Pain Week Survey (quotes and detail in attached report):

- Chronic Pain sufferers think 50% of GPs support them well with their pain

- Almost 50% of chronic pain sufferers have experienced significant barriers in regard to access to opioid-based medication
- 77% of people living with chronic pain find utilising health professional support unaffordable
- More than half of the participants feel like they are stigmatised because they have chronic pain and this was more apparent in the workplace
- 80% of chronic pain sufferers think that is important for the public to understand what it is like to live with chronic pain
- Almost 40% of chronic pain sufferers have spoken to their GP about accessing medicinal cannabis for pain management
- 76% of participants have utilised telehealth to meet with a GP
- 67% of participants benefit from using telehealth
- 81% of participants feel that they have all the technology required to engage with a practitioner through telehealth
- Over 55% of participants would consider using telehealth in an ongoing capacity

About National Pain Week 2021

The theme of National Pain Week 2021 is "Connection".

Chronic Pain Australia (CPA) is a not-for-profit dedicated to reducing the barriers, unnecessary suffering and isolation experienced by over 3.37 million Australians living with chronic pain.

National Pain Week (NPW) is the trademarked annual awareness event of CPA that allows us to highlight key issues facing people living with chronic pain on a national level. NPW 2021 will be held in the week commencing 26 July.

People living with chronic pain often feel isolated by their pain and regularly express wishing others, particularly decision makers, could understand what they experience daily. NPW 2021 will remind the community around pain sufferers that connection is key to addressing the isolation pain can create. The theme will also encourage people to connect with their bodies and acknowledge pain, rather than ignoring it and risking permanent damage.

Ends