

Chronic pain

Introduction

Chronic pain is pain which lasts for longer than the usual time of healing. It is often defined as lasting for more than six months (Merskey and Bogduk 1994). Chronic pain is not usually relieved by simple pain remedies and can be present almost every day, with varying intensity. Chronic pain can be debilitating and affect a person's ability to carry out their usual activities. Types of chronic pain include back pain, headaches, arthritis, and neuropathic pain which results from injury to nerves.

What were the survey questions?

In the 2006/07 New Zealand Health Survey, adult participants were asked if they experience chronic pain; that is, pain that has lasted, or is expected to last, six months or more. If so, they were asked questions about the location, cause and treatment of their chronic pain.

The cause of chronic pain is not reported here due to complexity of analysis. The survey did not ask directly how chronic pain affects participants' usual activities, but this could be analysed by looking at correlations between chronic pain and SF-36 information (not reported here).

Prevalence of chronic pain for adults

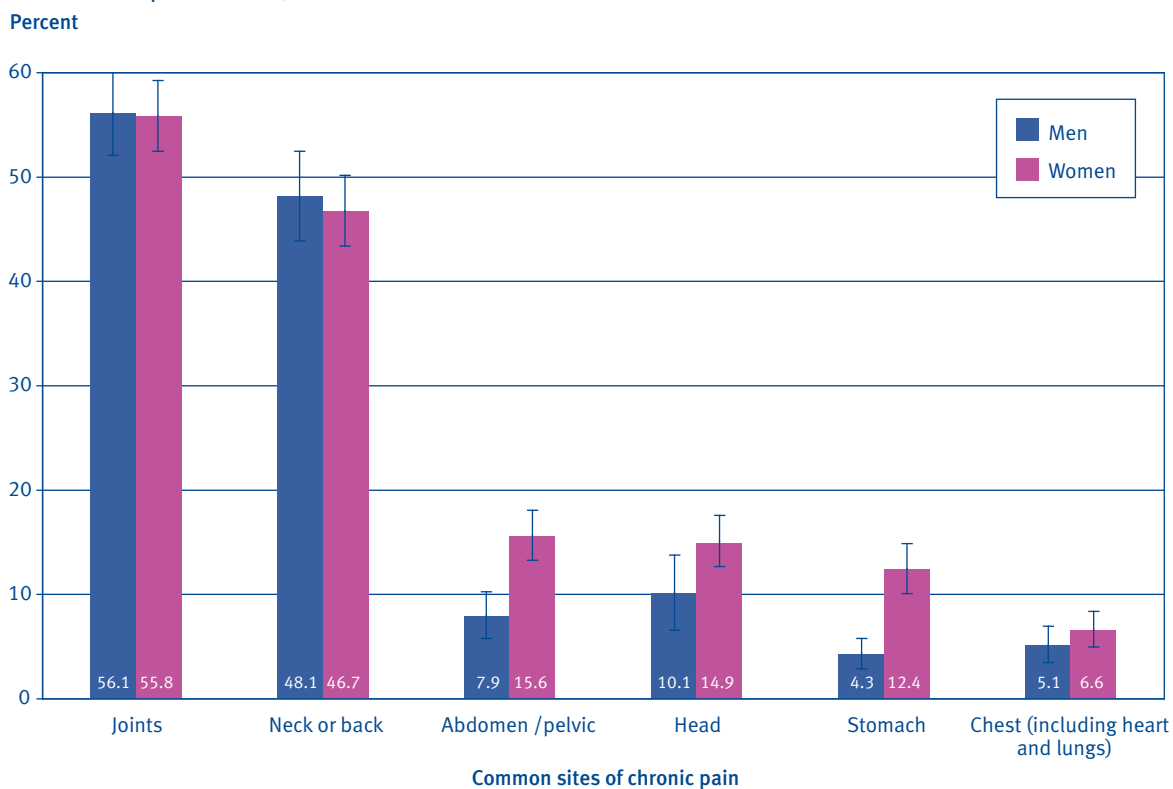
One in six adults (16.9%, 16.0–17.8) reported that they experienced chronic pain, which equates to 528,100 adults. When adjusted for age there was no difference between the prevalence of chronic pain in men (15.2%, 14.0–16.3) and women (16.1%, 14.9–17.2).

Chronic pain sufferers reported that the part(s) of their body affected by pain were:

- joints (57.6%, 55.0–60.3)
- neck or back (47.5%, 45.1–49.8)
- abdomen/pelvic region (12.5%, 10.8–14.3)
- head (12.0%, 10.0–14.0)
- chest, including heart and lungs (6.1%, 4.9–7.3)
- stomach (8.3%, 6.9–9.6)
- face/jaw (4.5%, 3.2–5.9)
- teeth/gums (1.7%, 1.1–2.3)
- other (1.2%, 0.7–1.9).

Women were more likely than men to be affected by chronic pain in the abdomen / pelvic region, head and stomach (p-values < 0.05) (Figure 4.13).

Figure 4.13: Six most common sites of chronic pain for adults, by gender (age standardised prevalence)

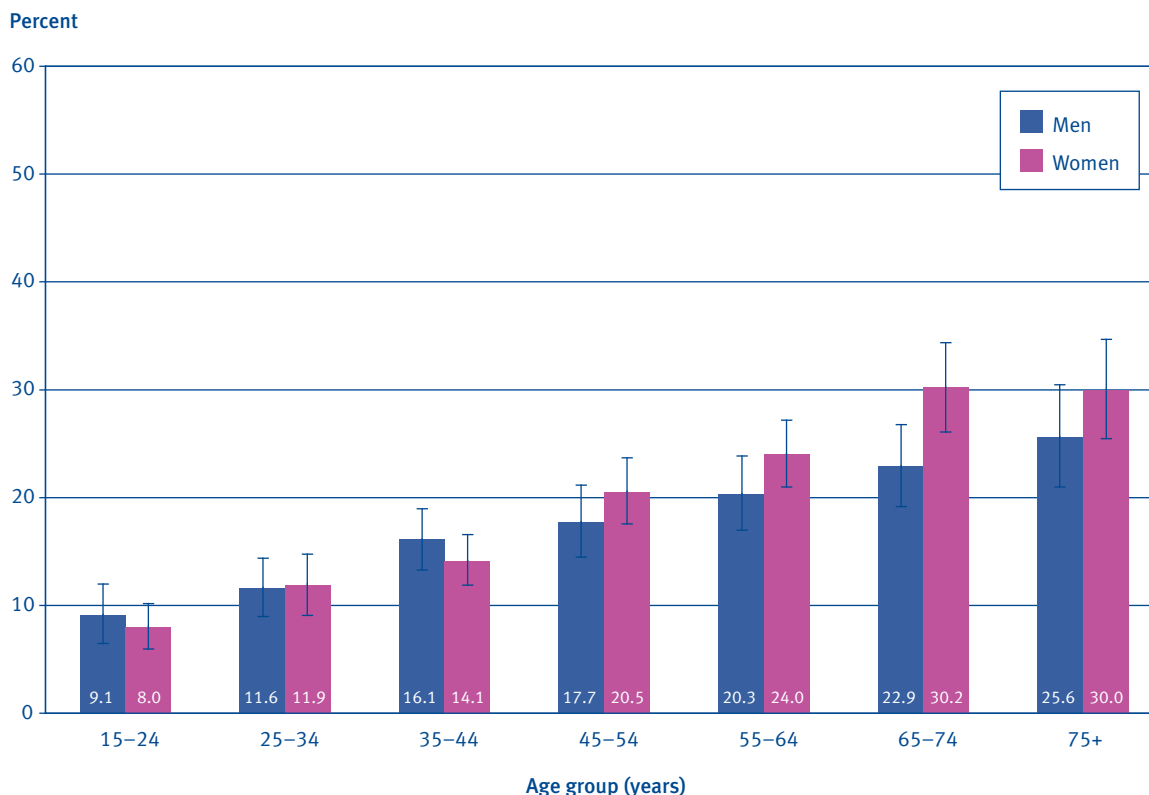


Source: 2006/07 New Zealand Health Survey

Prevalence of chronic pain, by age group and gender

Chronic pain was present in all age groups, but was more prevalent as age increased. Nearly one in three adults aged 65 years or over reported having chronic pain (Figure 4.14).

Figure 4.14: Chronic pain for adults, by age group and gender (unadjusted prevalence)



Source: 2006/07 New Zealand Health Survey

Prevalence of chronic pain, by ethnic group

Table 4.4 gives an indication of the burden of chronic pain in New Zealand's main ethnic population groups.

Table 4.4: Chronic pain for adults, by ethnic group (unadjusted)

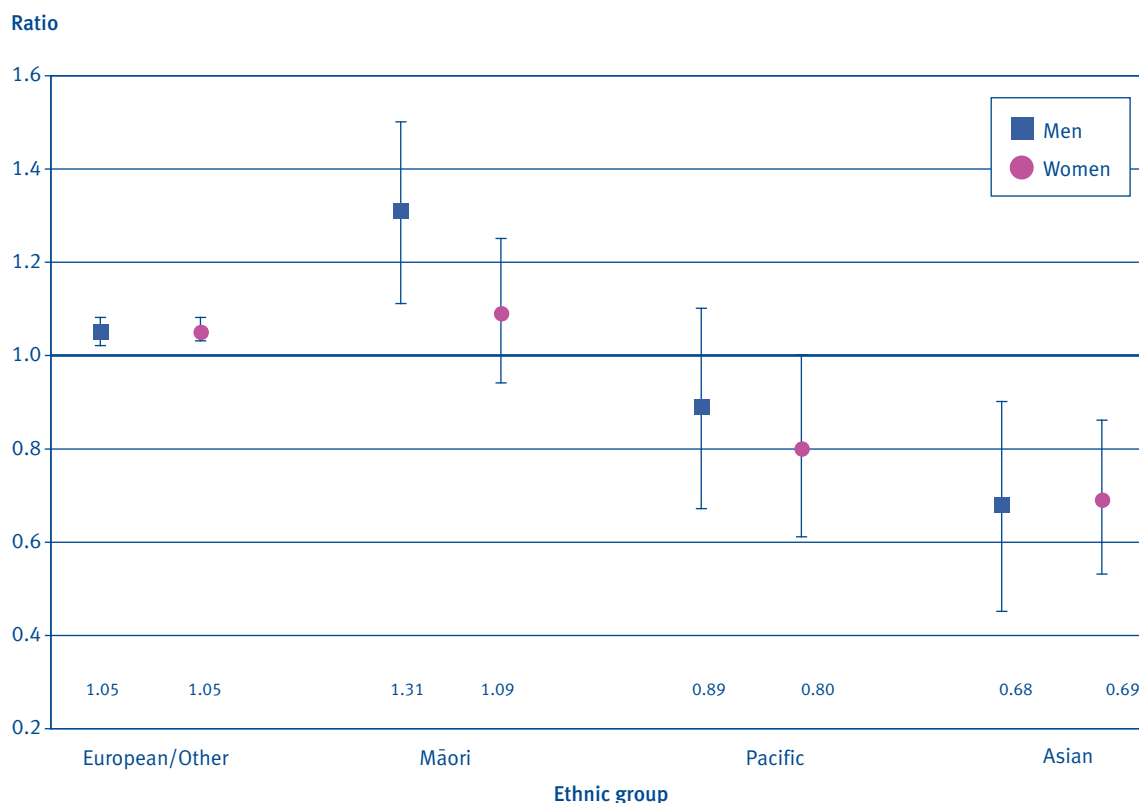
| Ethnic group | Prevalence (95% CI) | Number of adults |
|-----------------|---------------------|------------------|
| European/ Other | 18.1 (17.0–19.1) | 461000 |
| Māori | 17.3 (15.3–19.2) | 61400 |
| Pacific | 12.0 (10.0–14.0) | 19800 |
| Asian | 9.6 (7.8–11.3) | 26700 |

Source: 2006/07 New Zealand Health Survey

Note: Total response standard output for ethnic groups has been used.

When adjusted for age, Māori men had a significantly increased prevalence of chronic pain compared to men in the total population. Pacific women, Asian men and Asian women were significantly less likely to report chronic pain (Figure 4.15).

Figure 4.15: Chronic pain for adults, by ethnic group and gender (age standardised rate ratio)



Source: 2006/07 New Zealand Health Survey

Notes: Age standardised to the WHO world population. Reference group, with a rate ratio of 1.0 (indicated by the bold line), is the total male or female population aged 15 years and over. Total response standard output for ethnic groups has been used.

Prevalence of chronic pain, by neighbourhood deprivation

Men living in the most deprived neighbourhoods (NZDep2006 quintile 5: 19.3%, 16.2–22.5) were more likely than men living in the least deprived neighbourhoods (quintile 1: 13.0%, 10.3–15.6) to report chronic pain, standardised for age (p-value < 0.05). There were no differences for women.

Treatment for chronic pain

A small number of chronic pain sufferers (3.2%, 2.3–4.2) used injections to treat their pain. Half of all adults with chronic pain (51.0%, 48.6–53.5) used oral medication to treat their pain. Two out of five adults with chronic pain (40.8%, 38.3–43.3) did not report using any form of treatment for their pain.