



WHITE PAPER

Higher Costs, Less Care: How remote working may increase your company's musculoskeletal pain costs

Fern

With a backlog of elective surgery looming and new pain from uncomfortable home office setups, overwork, and ongoing stress, we're nearing a tipping point in musculoskeletal pain care.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, more employees than ever have been required to work from home. Those in essential industries are putting in long hours under stressful circumstances. Access to non-emergency care has also been limited.

Staying home was critical to keeping employees as safe and healthy as possible. But working from home and avoiding care can also have negative implications for health, especially for chronic musculoskeletal pain.

The increase in remote work may contribute to additional chronic musculoskeletal pain cases for a few different reasons:

- Poor ergonomics
- Lack of exercise
- Lack of access to medical care because of COVID-19 restrictions
- Overwork
- Increase in stress, social isolation and burnout

Low back and neck pain are already the top sources of healthcare spending in the United States.¹ As people in pain go untreated, future costs build up.

People in pain need support they can access from home, now. Surveys suggest that virtual care is appealing beyond the pandemic, too – 83% of patients intend to continue using telemedicine after the pandemic.²

Digital access to musculoskeletal pain programs during this time offers an opportunity for people in pain to access a safer, less costly approach that meets their needs while ultimately keeping them off an expensive, ineffective treatment path.

Setting the stage for an increase in chronic back pain

Whether employees are able to work from home or need to go in because their jobs are considered essential, work environments today are often uncomfortable – and stressful.

For those working remotely, many don't have ergonomic chairs or a dedicated office to work in. With many businesses closed or operating under reduced hours, remote workers are also moving less in general. Both poor ergonomics and reduced activity can contribute to new cases of low back pain.³

At the same time, increased activity and overuse can also lead to chronic pain. Those who work in places like essential businesses such as grocery stores and manufacturers may be working more than usual, and coping with additional stress.



Across industries, working more than 40 hours per week is associated with a higher risk of low back pain.⁴

And those working from home aren't exempt from overwork, either. Under COVID-19, remote workers are logging in an average of three extra hours a day on the job with boundaries blurred between home and work.⁵

In general, low back pain in particular is extremely common. Eighty percent of people will experience lower back pain in their lifetime.⁶ When pain lasts for three months or longer, it's considered chronic pain – and becomes much more difficult to treat. In chronic pain, there often isn't a single source of the pain, or a single way to treat it.



Mental health factors worsen chronic pain

Mental health factors can also influence chronic pain.⁷ When the body experiences stress, we go into “fight or flight” mode. The muscles tense, and the body releases stress hormones. Ongoing stress can lead the muscles to be tense all the time and cause pain.

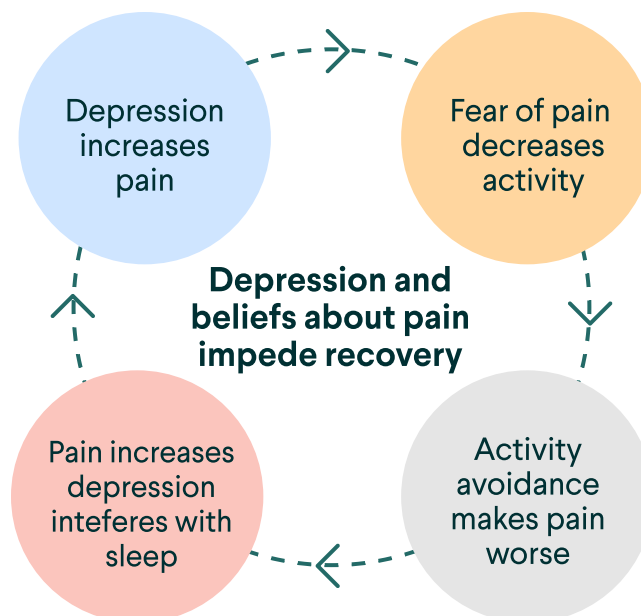


Stress can make the nervous system more reactive and sensitive to pain.⁸

In some cases, people with chronic pain may even experience pain from mild stimuli, such as being lightly brushed against.

Sometimes, those suffering from chronic pain can get stuck in a mental loop that exacerbates their pain. They may worry that the pain will never get better, which research shows can make the pain experience feel worse.⁹

Even under normal circumstances, employees who work from home report social isolation and burnout.¹⁰ A situation like the COVID-19 pandemic can make those feelings more severe.



To make matters worse, social isolation and depression are linked.¹¹ Sixty-five percent of people with depression also report chronic musculoskeletal pain.¹²

Experts recommend addressing the psychological side of chronic back pain as well as the physical side – but that doesn't often happen. Just 8% of people with low back pain are prescribed cognitive behavioral therapy, despite treatment guidelines.¹³ Without addressing the mental side of back pain, it's more difficult for patients to get better.

Right now, many people lack access to both physical and mental care, which can exacerbate pain symptoms.



65%

of people with depression also report chronic MSK pain

8%

of people with low back pain are prescribed CBT, despite guidelines



Finding the right approach at the right time

Research shows that chronic musculoskeletal pain treatment should combine patient education with exercise therapy.¹⁴ When people in pain don't receive the appropriate care at the right time, their symptoms can worsen, leading them down a path toward expensive, ineffective surgery. Offering a remote back pain program now can reach people in pain where and when they need it.

“When people in pain have immediate access to an effective treatment, they're more likely to get relief and less likely to pursue expensive, invasive options,” says Meredith Christiansen, DPT, PhD, clinical research scientist at Fern Health. “Exercise and education are the two pillars of effective, first-line treatment for chronic back pain.”

Musculoskeletal pain treatment can get very expensive. It's the top source of healthcare spending in the United States. For example, back surgery costs around \$100,000 on average.¹⁵

Surgery is riskier than conservative back pain treatments, and doesn't necessarily yield better results. The most common shoulder surgery is no more effective than a placebo, studies found.¹⁶ Research shows that cognitive intervention and exercises are just as effective as lumbar fusion surgery, one of the most common back surgeries.¹⁷ The same study also found that the early complication rate in the surgical group was 18%.

Surgery is not the recommended first-line treatment for most musculoskeletal pain. Often, people in pain end up on this path because they don't get the correct treatment at the beginning of their pain journey. Surgery also fails to address the underlying causes of chronic pain, such as depression and anxiety.

\$100K

cost of lumbar fusion surgery

18%

early complication rate in the surgical group



An opportunity for digital care

The increase in remote work and delay in elective treatments give employers an opportunity to offer their teams digital care that gets the same or better results, at much lower costs. Education and exercise treatments can both be delivered virtually. Health coaching over the phone or via chat offer social support and encouragement throughout remote programs.

Remote care also eliminates common barriers to in-person treatment. Even without social distancing in place, it can be inconvenient to get to physical therapy appointments. For many, here's also a cost barrier on the individual level. For example, members whose copay is more than \$30 are 30% less likely to choose physical therapy over more invasive procedures.¹⁸

Employers can offer remote programs to their employees free of cost. With both the financial and logistical barriers removed, employees have the tools they need to start feeling better.

The Fern Health program impacts the whole person: Meaningful results in pain reduction, depression, and anxiety



60%

of members have clinically significant pain reduction



40%

average pain reduction



40%

average depression reduction



41%

average anxiety reduction

Getting started

Once you've decided to offer remote back pain care to your employees, the next step is to get at-risk members to sign up. The following steps help ensure high engagement with your program:

- 1 Don't stop at one promotion.** Your employees have a lot on their plates, and even if back pain is a problem for them, many will need a few reminders. Share information about your program with remote employees over email, through your company messaging system such as Slack, and on your intranet. In person, consider sharing print materials, too.
- 2 Get support from your vendor.** Your remote back pain care provider should provide your human resources team with shareable materials to simplify the onboarding process. At Fern Health, we work directly with our clients to provide personalized print and digital content to get your employees enrolled and feeling better.
- 3 Host a virtual launch.** If you can't host an in-person wellness fair, consider launching your new program with a video call. You can demonstrate the tool and share its benefits virtually while you have a captive audience.
- 4 Ask for volunteers to help spread the word.** Early adopters of your program can help share their experiences and encourage others to join, too. You can also provide ambassadors with their own social media toolkit (ask your vendor for help).

With a backlog of elective surgery looming and backs aching from uncomfortable chairs and ongoing stress, we're nearing a crisis in musculoskeletal pain care. Digital care can intervene and prevent expensive, ineffective, and invasive treatment options for employees during this crisis and beyond.

Ready to learn how Fern Health can help your employees, wherever they are? GET IN TOUCH: info@fernhealth.com

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