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Chronic pain linked to disability in South Africa – UCT study shows

A study out of the University of Cape Town (UCT) has found that chronic pain is both common and closely linked to disability, highlighting an urgent public health issue that has long lacked local data. The study, published in [PAIN Reports](#), analysed more than 10 000 adults and provides the clearest picture to date of how ongoing pain affects daily life and functioning in the country.

The study agreed with an earlier finding that 18.3% of South African adults live with chronic pain, defined as pain lasting three months or more. Of those individuals, 27.8% experience some form of disability.

The study also showed a robust relationship between chronic pain and challenges in two specific areas:

- **Cognition:** People with chronic pain were significantly more likely to report cognitive difficulties with things like thinking, remembering or concentrating.
- **Mobility:** Chronic pain was moderately strongly associated with mobility problems, meaning people found it harder to walk, move around or perform physical tasks.

However, the study did not find a strong link between chronic pain and difficulties with self-care, such as washing or dressing.

A smaller group – those with high-impact chronic pain (HICP), meaning pain that highly limits daily functioning – made up 1.7% of the population, representing nearly one in 10 people with chronic pain. Members of this high-impact group tended to be older, more likely female, more likely to receive government grants and more likely to report poor overall health.

Researchers conducted a cross-sectional, descriptive, secondary analysis of data from the 2016 South African Demographic and Health Survey, a nationally representative household survey. In total, the study included 10 336 adults.

Disability was assessed using the internationally recognised Washington Group on Disability items. Statistical analysis was performed using R software. This approach allowed the

researchers to examine how widespread chronic pain is in South Africa and how strongly it correlates with functional limitations in daily life.

Dr Murray McDonald, lead author of the study and a PhD candidate, said: "Chronic pain is a leading cause of disability worldwide, but very little national data has existed for South Africa until now. This study confirms that chronic pain is not only common but also has a meaningful impact on people's ability to think clearly and move freely.

"These limitations can affect every aspect of daily life – from employment and education to social participation and overall quality of life. The fact that more than a quarter of people with chronic pain experience disability shows that the impact of chronic pain is far broader than pain alone."

Dr McDonald said the findings were especially important because chronic pain is often "invisible" and misunderstood. "By showing clear links to disability, the study makes a persuasive case for recognising chronic pain as a significant public health issue requiring focused attention."

For Professor Romy Parker, co-author of the study and director of the Pain Management Unit in the [Department of Anaesthesia and Perioperative Medicine](#), the study fills an important gap. "For too long, chronic pain has been under recognised in low- and middle-income countries, despite its strong connection to disability and reduced quality of life. The fact that nearly one in five adults in South Africa lives with chronic pain should be viewed as a call to action for health systems, policymakers, employers and the public," she said.

According to Professor Parker, the study's identification of the HICP subgroup is also notable. "These individuals have much greater levels of disability and poorer health overall. Understanding their needs is essential for designing effective interventions," she said.

She added: "The strong association with cognitive and mobility difficulties suggests that chronic pain affects both physical and mental functioning. This reinforces what many people living with chronic pain report: the experience is multidimensional, affecting far more than just the site of pain."

Based on the study findings, Parker said several steps can be taken to further study and possibly reduce the burden of chronic pain and its associated disabilities in South Africa:

- Integrate chronic pain into national health planning: Chronic pain should be recognised as a significant contributor to disability. Public health strategies and resource allocation should reflect this burden.
- Refine existing surveys and initiate further studies: Future surveys should monitor pain treatments and barriers to healthcare to better understand how chronic pain is managed in South Africa. The concept of HICP requires further refinement (another study from these researchers is already underway).
- Support people with high impact chronic pain: This group faces the greatest health and social challenges. Tailored interventions, financial support mechanisms and targeted clinical pathways can improve outcomes.

The study is titled "[Chronic pain is associated with disability: results from a large, population-based survey in South Africa](#)".

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