'Silent epidemic' of chronic pain affects nearly 28 million in UK, study suggests

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Review finds women are more likely to experience chronic pain than men, while prevalence was generally found to increase with age

Chronic pain affects more than two fifths of the UK population, meaning that around 28 million adults are living with pain that has lasted for three months or longer, a new study reveals.

The authors estimate that almost 44% of the population experience [chronic pain](https://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/sep/04/chronic-pain-drugs-medical-research), with up to 14.3% living with chronic pain that is either moderately or severely disabling.

“Pain is really under-represented in terms of the public awareness of it,” said Alan Fayaz, an author of the study from Imperial College, London. “Nobody ever talks about chronic pain, it is like a silent epidemic.”

Published in the[journal BMJ Open](http://bmjopen.bmj.com/lookup/doi/10.1136/bmjopen-2015-010364) by a team of UK scientists the research, part funded by the [British Pain Society](https://www.britishpainsociety.org/people-with-pain/), involved a review of 19 studies conducted since 1990 involving a total of nearly 140,000 people in the UK. The authors found that women were more likely to experience chronic pain than men, while prevalence was generally found to increase with age. In one study, prevalence among those over the age of 75 was as high as 62%.

“Bearing in mind that we are, in general an ageing population, that’s of concern because what you would then expect would be if you repeated this study in about 10 years time, the prevalence of chronic pain would be higher,” said Fayaz.

Looking at seven studies that explored chronic pain across the general population, the researchers found that between 35 and 51% of the UK population are affected. When the data from the studies were combined and analysed by the researchers, they estimated that 43.5% of the population experience chronic pain. However, the study did not explore the causes behind the pain.

“We were keen to steer the discussion away from underlying causes that might otherwise imply that pain is only a symptom of disease - thereby acknowledging that chronic pain, of all varieties, shares common features that impact on the way we assess and manage these patients,” said Fayaz.

Among the results, the review also revealed that between 10.4 and 14.3% of the UK population have chronic pain that is either moderately or severely disabling, based on four studies.

Fayaz believes the research highlights the need for better methods for diagnosing and tackling chronic pain. “What I would really like is for us to have better tools in order for us to identify those people who are most severely affected and how we can help them, what their care needs are,” he said.