

Conditions like back pain and arthritis must have global health response

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International experts, led by Curtin University, are calling for global action from health authorities to address the huge burden of musculoskeletal conditions, which affect about one in three people worldwide, including younger people.

Musculoskeletal conditions, such as arthritis and low back pain, are strongly associated with functional disability, which reduces a person's ability to participate in work and social roles.

The paper, released in the May edition of *Bulletin of the World Health Organization (WHO)*, examined the global impact of more than 150 musculoskeletal conditions, including back and neck pain, osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and fractures, and set three priorities for global action.

Lead author Professor Andrew Briggs, from the School of Physiotherapy and Exercise Science at Curtin University, said musculoskeletal conditions shared similar risk factors to other chronic [health](#) conditions, such as obesity, poor nutrition and a sedentary lifestyle, but did not receive the same level of attention and health policy prioritisation.

"Musculoskeletal conditions, such as neck and back pain, account for the greatest proportion of persistent pain across age groups and geographies all over the world," Professor Briggs said.

"While not as strongly associated with death as other non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, the disability-burden associated with musculoskeletal conditions is enormous and far greater than other health conditions.

"Despite these conditions often leading to significant mental health decline, an increased risk of developing other [chronic health conditions](#) and a higher probability of death, musculoskeletal health is not identified as a priority area for the global management of non-communicable diseases and

has largely been neglected from a health resourcing point of view."

While an estimated one in three people across the globe are affected by a chronic, painful musculoskeletal condition, recent data suggests as many as one in two adult Americans are living with a musculoskeletal condition. Research shows the burden of disease is also increasing more rapidly in low and middle-income countries.

Professor Briggs said the research called on WHO and its Member States to help reduce the global disability burden of musculoskeletal conditions by explicitly addressing it in health reforms and policy agendas, including setting global targets that align with people's functional ability, rather than only mortality outcomes.

"Australia is one of the global leaders in this area and we have the opportunity to share our knowledge and experiences with other countries, especially low and middle-income nations," Professor Briggs said.

"There is a wealth of evidence documenting the huge toll that musculoskeletal conditions have on a person's physical ability, mental health, as well as the significant burden in terms of healthcare costs. This highlights that policies, strategies and health programs for [non-communicable diseases](#) must include musculoskeletal health as an integral component, particularly within health programs targeted at lower socio-economic communities and older people."

The paper is titled "[Reducing the global burden of musculoskeletal conditions](#)."

More information: Andrew M Briggs et al. Reducing the global burden of musculoskeletal conditions, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* (2018). [DOI: 10.2471/BLT.17.204891](https://doi.org/10.2471/BLT.17.204891)

Provided by Curtin University

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