

# NIH analysis shows Americans are in pain

August 11 2015



## Pain in the United States

A new analysis of data from the 2012 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) has found that most American adults have experienced some level of pain, from brief to more lasting pain, and from relatively minor to more severe pain. The analysis helps to unravel the complexities of a

Nation in pain. It found that an estimated 25.3 million adults (11.2 percent) had pain every day for the preceding 3 months. Nearly 40 million adults (17.6 percent) experience severe levels of pain. Those with severe pain are also likely to have worse health status. The analysis was funded by the National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) and was published in *The Journal of Pain*.

"The number of people who suffer from severe and lasting pain is striking," said Josephine P. Briggs, M.D., director of NCCIH. "This analysis adds valuable new scope to our understanding of pain and could inform the National Pain Strategy in the areas of population research and disparities. It may help shape future research, development, and targeting of effective pain interventions, including complementary [health](#) approaches."

Pain is one of the leading reasons Americans turn to complementary health approaches such as yoga, massage, and meditation—which may help manage pain and other symptoms that are not consistently addressed by prescription drugs and other conventional treatments. For this reason, NCCIH research priorities include the study of complementary approaches to determine their effectiveness for treating symptoms such as pain.

The CDC's NHIS is an annual study in which tens of thousands of Americans are interviewed about their health- and illness-related experiences. The 2012 NHIS asked participants about the frequency and intensity of pain experienced in the prior 3 months. The survey results are based on combined data from 8,781 American adults from a subsection of the larger NHIS.

Researchers assigned pain severity using an approach developed by CDC investigators working with the Washington Group on Disability

Statistics, which provides four categories of pain. Among the findings of the analysis:

- An estimated 23.4 million adults (10.3 percent) experience a lot of pain.
- An estimated 126 million adults (55.7 percent) reported some type of pain in the 3 months prior to the survey.
- Adults in the two most severe pain groups were likely to have worse health status, use more health care, and suffer from more disability than those with less severe pain. However, approximately half of individuals with the most [severe pain](#) still rated their overall health as good or better.
- There were associations between [pain severity](#) and race, ethnicity, language preference, gender, and age. Women, older individuals, and non-Hispanics were more likely to report any pain, while Asians were less likely.
- Minorities who did not choose to be interviewed in English are markedly less likely to report pain.
- The impact of gender on pain varies by race and ethnicity.

"This report begins to answer calls for better national data on the nature and extent of the pain problem," said Richard L. Nahin, Ph.D., M.P.H., lead epidemiologist for NCCIH and author of the analysis. "The experience of pain is subjective. It's not surprising then that the data show varied responses to pain even in those with similar levels of pain. Continuing analyses of these data may help identify subpopulations that would benefit from additional [pain](#) treatment options."

**More information:** Read more about the report:  
[nccih.nih.gov/research/statist ... S/2012/pain/severity](https://nccih.nih.gov/research/statistics/2012/pain/severity)

Provided by National Institutes of Health

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