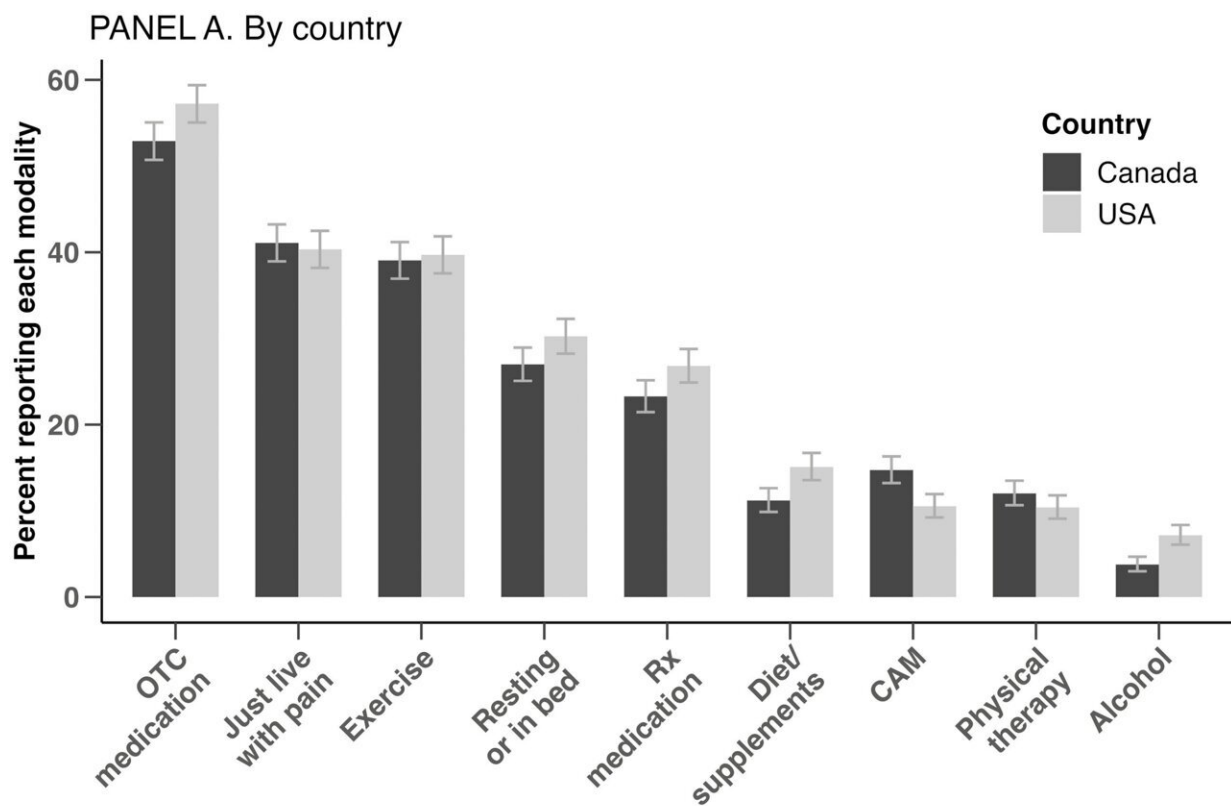


# More Americans than Canadians use alcohol to dull their pain, according to study

December 12 2023, by Crystal Mackay



Percent of respondents who mentioned each pain management intervention. Sample size n = 3 696 who mentioned any treatments; that is, excludes 417 respondents who stated they use "nothing." The number also counts any intervention in the open-ended item as one intervention. Pain level was dichotomized as no or low versus high (using the median score of 8 as threshold (0–8 vs. 9–55). CAM = complementary or alternative medicine, OTC = over-the-counter, Rx = prescription medication. Credit: *Innovation in Aging* (2023). DOI: 10.1093/geroni/igad103

From exercise and over-the-counter medications to alcohol use and prescription drugs, North Americans report using a number of different strategies to manage and prevent day-to-day pain. Some of these strategies are useful to mitigate pain, and others, like alcohol, are actually counterproductive and can make pain worse.

A new study from Western University researchers explored how frequently people use a variety of pain management strategies, and how those correlate to their level of pain and other factors, including where they live.

The research team, led by sociology professor Anna Zajacova, found that adults who reported high levels of pain were eight times more likely to use [alcohol](#) as a pain management strategy than those who had low levels or no pain. They also found Americans were twice as likely than Canadians to turn to alcohol to dull their pain, with just under 4% of Canadian respondents saying they used alcohol as a pain management strategy, compared to almost 8% in the U.S. That number jumped to 21% for those with the highest levels of pain in both countries.

[The study](#) appeared in a special issue on pain and [pain management](#) in the journal *Innovation in Aging* published online. The authors note that high [alcohol use](#) in the U.S. may be a reflection of more limited access to [health care](#) than in Canada.

"Our research shows that using alcohol to treat pain is somewhat common, unfortunately. Previous research has shown that is not only ineffective at treating pain, but it can actually be counterproductive," said Zajacova. "Our study also indicates that there is likely a lot of unmet need for better treatment options for people to manage their pain."

The study was based on an [online survey](#) of more than 4,000 adults, which asked them to choose up to 10 pain treatment options including things like medication, [physical therapy](#) and exercise. Not surprisingly, the greatest predictor of higher frequency of all pain treatments was the level of pain that the person reported.

And while alcohol use was the most striking finding, not all the self-care strategies examined in the study are counterproductive. The team found that over-the-counter medications, exercise and acceptance were the most commonly used and were also used most often by those who had low levels of pain.

"What we learned from this survey is that people aren't necessarily just visiting their doctor to manage their pain, and it's important to understand the non-medical and non-pharmacological strategies that people are using, for better or for worse," said Zajacova.

The hope is that this research will help guide clinicians in adopting holistic patient-centered approaches with their patients that include a range of self-care strategies and can initiate conversations around both the counterproductive strategies and the ones that might be of most benefit.

**More information:** Anna Zajacova et al, Self-reported pain treatment practices among U.S. and Canadian adults: Findings from a population survey, *Innovation in Aging* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/geroni/igad103](https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igad103)

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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