

Canadian Survey Sheds New Light on Back Pain

EXPLORES PREVALENCE, REMEDIES USED AND SATISFACTION WITH CARE

Editorial Staff

A telephone survey conducted by the Environics Research Group¹ for the Canadian Chiropractic Association provides important new data on the impact of back pain on Canada. The survey, which polled 1,500 Canadian adults, also reveals surprising results about the average person's use of chiropractic to treat back pain.

The survey was conducted in April and May 2003, with an initial sample of more than 12,000 telephone numbers dialed randomly. Participants were asked a series of questions about their own experiences with back pain (frequency, severity, possible causes, etc.), along with the methods used to treat the pain, and how satisfied they were with treatment. Response data were analyzed and weighted by age, gender and region to provide a representative view of the country, excluding Canada's three most sparsely populated provinces (Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut).

Some of the survey's major findings are summarized as follows:

Back Pain

- 64% of the respondents reported experiencing pain in the shoulders, upper or lower back in the past year; 71% experienced back pain in the past two years.
- For most people (61%), the pain lasted one week or less. However, one-sixth of those with back pain said the pain was continuous or never went away.
- 69% of back-pain sufferers described their pain as moderate or severe. Older patients and those less educated and less affluent were more likely to rate their pain as severe.
- Five categories accounted for 64% of all causes of back pain. A health condition (such as fibromyalgia, pregnancy, surgery, etc.) was the most frequent reason given as the main cause of pain (22%), followed by work-related injuries (15%); poor posture (10%); sports injuries (9%); and improper lifting (8%).
- Few people took time off from work as a result of back pain, but a majority of those who did missed a significant amount of work days: Only 15% of the subjects reported missing time due to back pain, but a significant portion of those (53%) missed at least one month of work, and 20% missed at least a year.
- In addition to lost time from work, back pain caused an assortment of physical and mental difficulties. Almost six in 10 (56%) said they had to give up or limit their participation in certain sports or physical activities; 40% said they had problems concentrating on tasks; 33% spent less time socializing with family and friends; and 24% felt depressed as a result of the pain.

Chiropractic and Other Treatments

- Surprisingly, chiropractic was not the primary treatment for back pain in the survey. More than half of those suffering from back pain reported turning to pharmaceuticals for back pain relief: 37% said they took an over-the-counter medication; another 17% said they used a

prescription medication.

- Chiropractic was the fourth most frequently used treatment for back pain: 14% of sufferers reported going to a chiropractor for relief. Interestingly, the same percentage of patients who reported visiting a DC for back pain also reported doing nothing for their pain.
- Although chiropractic wasn't the most popular form of pain relief, it garnered the highest satisfaction rating among any treatment in the survey. Of the 155 people who reported going to a chiropractor, 92% were either "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with the care they received. In fact, a greater percentage of people were "very satisfied" with chiropractic (69%) than with any other treatment listed in the survey.

The Typical Canadian Chiropractic Patient

After analyzing the data, the researchers were able to establish a profile of the average chiropractic patient. Generally, Canadians who used chiropractic were more likely to:

- be 30 years or older;
- work full-time;
- make more than \$20,000 per year;
- have at least a community college or vocational school education;
- reside in western Canada;
- use herbal supplements;
- visit a physician for an annual check-up;
- try to eat a healthy diet;
- suffer from moderate or severe back pain; and
- regard back pain as a very important public-health issue.

In addition to the back pain questions, the surveyors also asked questions specific to chiropractic, with rather surprising results regarding patient satisfaction with chiropractic care.

- Four in 10 Canadians reported seeing a doctor of chiropractic at some time in their life. This figure jumped to 50% among people who experienced back pain in the past two years, and 55% among back pain sufferers who described the pain as moderate or severe.
- Canadians who had sought a DC (except for recent back-pain sufferers who mentioned having visited a chiropractor for their back pain) were asked how satisfied they were with their most recent chiropractic treatment. While almost half said they were "very" satisfied, 23% reported being "not very" or "not at all" satisfied with the care they received.

Analysis

The Environics survey is the latest to show the impact back pain has on society. Nearly two-thirds of all Canadians reported suffering back pain at least once in the past year; of those with back pain, the condition usually lasted up to a week and caused mild or moderate pain.

When a person experienced back pain, he or she was more likely to reach for some type of medication before seeing a doctor of chiropractic. While these results are disappointing, it also is encouraging to know that approximately one in seven Canadian adults chose chiropractic to treat back pain.

The Environics survey also provided important data that could be utilized by the chiropractic profession. One figure sure to raise eyebrows is the statement that the number of people who see a

chiropractor for back pain is roughly equal to the number of people who do nothing for their pain. Of the back pain sufferers who did nothing to address the condition, over two-thirds did so because they either thought the pain would go away, thought the pain wasn't that severe, or disliked or didn't trust drugs. This means a large portion of the Canadian population is suffering from back pain, but may not be fully aware of the healing benefits chiropractic care can provide.

Another important finding was that nearly 25% of all back pain patients were dissatisfied with their last visit to the chiropractor. Reasons for patients' dissatisfaction with chiropractic care was not addressed in the survey, but this surprising statistic should serve as a wake-up call to the profession, and perhaps even make some chiropractors reassess their treatment methods.

The Survey of Canadian Adults: Back Pain, can be ordered from the Environics Research Group by phone (416-920-9010); fax (416-920-3299); or e-mail (research@environics.ca).

Reference

1. *Survey of Canadian Adults: Back Pain*. Toronto: Environics Research Group Limited, May 2003.

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