

How has pain management been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

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Written by: Brianna Weibye, Graduate Student in Exercise and Rehabilitation Science

Mentor: Dr. Marie Hoeger-Bement

Edited by: Dr. Sandra Hunter, Mike Haischer, Toni Uhrich

Key Points:

- **The COVID-19 pandemic has caused psychological, social, and economic burden for people in chronic pain.**
- **Social distancing mandates may contribute to factors worsening chronic pain symptoms due to limited support and changing of pain management resources.**
- **Delays in chronic pain treatment promote long-term health disparities with implications for rehabilitation within healthcare systems.**

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have caused a huge shift in both healthcare and daily activities, especially for chronic pain communities worldwide. Chronic pain affects up to 47% of the general population and is considered the leading cause of disability and includes high economic and social burdens [3.6](#). Although current challenges of the pandemic have been significant, it may be the long-term effects that will have the greatest impact on society, particularly those living with chronic pain [1.5](#).

COVID-19 has caused significant public health and personal issues for those that have chronic pain [1](#). Current resources are focused on frontline services, which may leave limited support and decreased access to pain management for the chronic pain community during the pandemic [2,4,5](#). The social distancing and safety protocol recommendations may have caused worsened pain conditions due to inaccessibility of healthcare, such as, cancellations of elective surgeries, delays in timely access to medications and disruptions in social support systems [1,3](#). Additionally, physical activity has declined during the pandemic, resulting in deconditioning of those that rely on physical therapy and exercise

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programs as part of their pain management. These persistent stressors attributed to the pandemic safety guidelines have been perceived to increase pain severity [Figure 1.4](#).

The downstream consequences of disrupting treatments for chronic pain individuals have yet to be comprehensively documented but are likely to be significant with possible worsening of mental health, substance misuse and future healthcare spending [1,2,3,4](#). Delaying treatment of chronic pain will not only have consequences for individuals themselves but healthcare systems and providers [2](#). Furthermore, postponing pain management for acute pain conditions could also lead to the development of chronic pain [6](#). The effects of the pandemic have not only been distressing to those with a COVID-19 diagnosis, but adversely affecting health outcomes with implications for rehabilitation within chronic pain communities.

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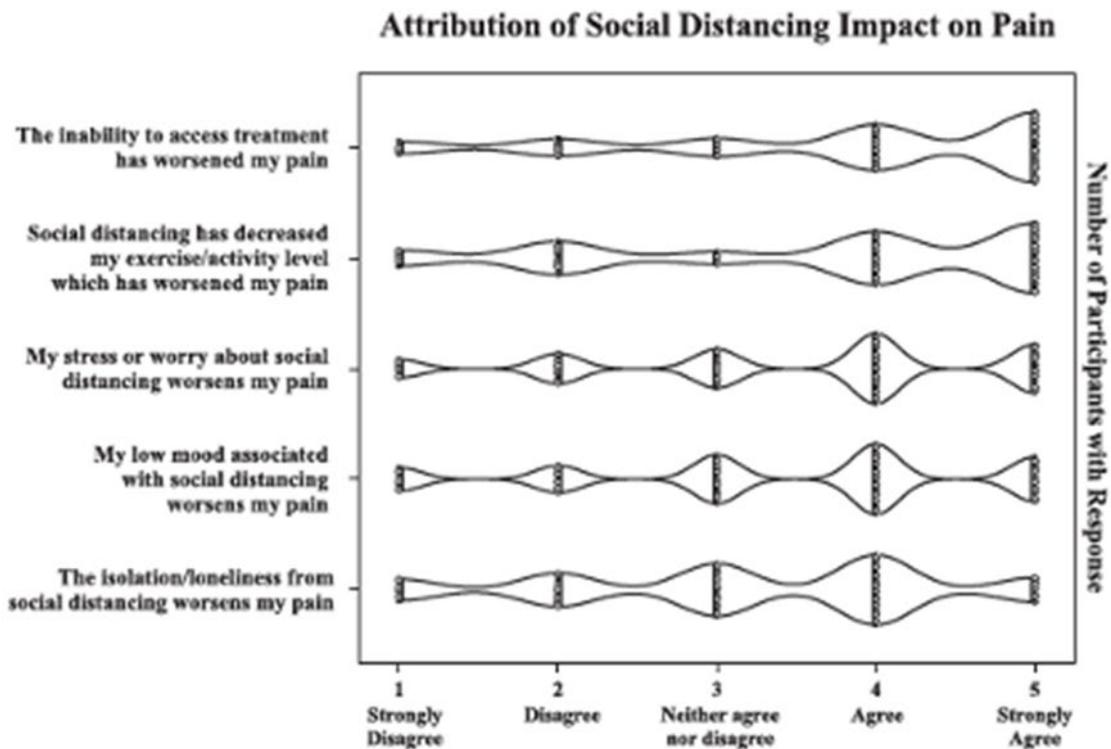


Figure 1. The social distancing policies and increased levels of isolation necessary to slow the spread of COVID-19 have affected the chronic pain community. The data gathered for Figure 1 was obtained from participants categorized within chronic pain populations including those with fibromyalgia, chronic low-back pain, and persistent pain for three months or longer. The majority of participants within this study attributed social distancing to increased self-reported pain symptoms. As depicted in the figure, chronic pain populations reported to ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ that the inability to access treatment, decreased activity levels, increased stress, decreased mood and isolation were reported as contributing factors ⁴.

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