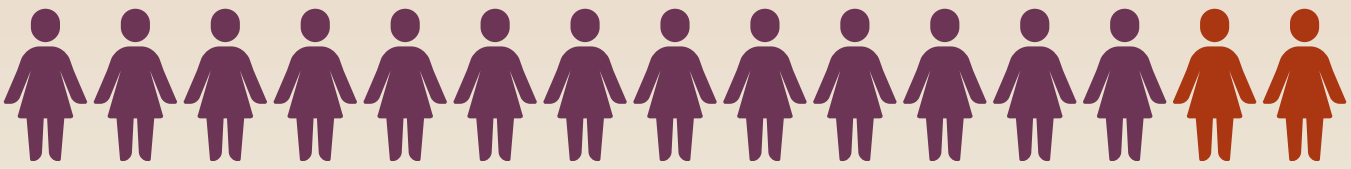
Chronic Pain and Substance Use among Women Veterans:

PROJECT SUMMARY

Women experience more severe and recurrent chronic pain than men and are disproportionately affected by various chronic pain conditions. Women Veterans are more likely to report chronic pain, depression, and anxiety. However, barriers remain for women Veterans and former servicewomen seeking care for chronic pain. As one of the fastest growing populations of Veterans and active service members, it is critical that resources are developed that reflect their experiences. This project created evidence-based resources for women Veterans and their health care providers that reflect women Veterans experiences with chronic pain, trauma, and substance use.



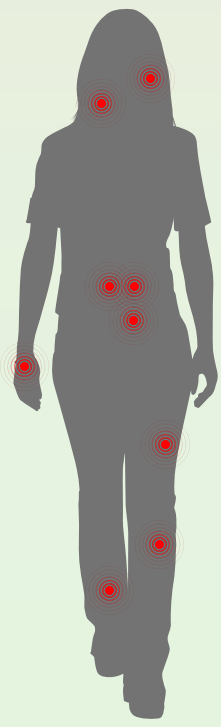
15
Women Veterans interviewed

7
Substances reported

20 - 29
The average number of years living in pain

13
Women using substances for pain management at the time of interview

What We Heard



Experiences of chronic pain as women Veterans
Most Veterans interviewed reported musculoskeletal pain that was connected to their military service. Some injuries resulted from training and/or from the prolonged use of equipment, such as boots, that were not designed for women's bodies. For many women, the physical pain that they experienced could not be divorced from experiences of trauma.

Limited access to health and social services
Long waitlists, short appointment times, stigma, a lack of women-centered and Veteran-specific supports, and insufficient information were widely reported as multi-level barriers to care.

"It's really hard living with chronic pain and feeling like your body was taken away from you."

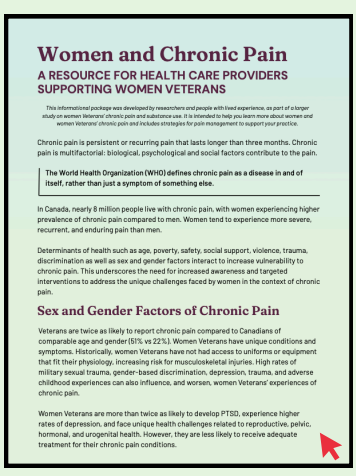
Substance use for pain management
All participants shared that they used substances at one point for pain management. Many women Veterans expressed that because of co-existing chronic pain, trauma, and PTSD, it was often difficult to know if the substance was helping reduce their pain or quieting the trauma. Only some women felt comfortable speaking to their healthcare providers about the substances. Few received insight from their providers on how to safely use the substance, or find alternatives, for pain management.

Resiliency, self-advocacy, and desired supports
Despite the many challenges they faced, women Veterans continued to advocate for their health by seeking pain management strategies that worked for them. A need for relational practice and services that are trauma- and gender-informed, holistic, and tailored specifically to their needs as women Veterans living with chronic pain was articulated.

What We Developed

Resources for women Veterans and their healthcare providers on:

- why women experience chronic pain
- information about substance use and pain management
- grounding and trauma-informed practice
- pain management strategies
- where to find support



Women and Chronic Pain

A RESOURCE FOR HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS SUPPORTING WOMEN VETERANS

This informational package was developed by researchers and people with lived experience, as part of a larger study on women Veterans' chronic pain and substance use. It is intended to help you learn more about women and women Veterans' chronic pain and includes strategies for pain management to support your practice.

Chronic pain is persistent or recurring pain that lasts longer than three months. Chronic pain is multifactorial: biological, psychological and social factors contribute to the pain.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines chronic pain as a disease in and of itself, rather than just a symptom of something else.

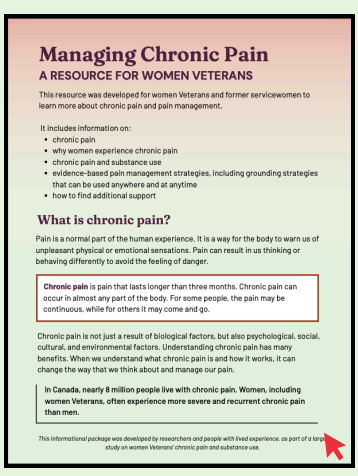
In Canada, nearly 8 million people live with chronic pain, with women experiencing higher prevalence of chronic pain compared to men. Women tend to experience more severe, recurrent, and enduring pain than men.

Determinants of health such as age, poverty, safety, social support, violence, trauma, discrimination as well as sex and gender factors interact to increase vulnerability to chronic pain. This underscores the need for increased awareness and targeted interventions to address the unique challenges faced by women in the context of chronic pain.

Sex and Gender Factors of Chronic Pain

Veterans are twice as likely to report chronic pain compared to Canadians of comparable age and gender (51% vs 22%). Women Veterans have unique conditions and symptoms. Historically, women Veterans have not had access to uniforms or equipment that fit their physiology, increasing risk for musculoskeletal injuries. High rates of military sexual trauma, gender-based discrimination, depression, trauma, and adverse childhood experiences can also influence, and worsen, women Veterans' experiences of chronic pain.

Women Veterans are more than twice as likely to develop PTSD, experience higher rates of depression, and face unique health challenges related to reproductive, pelvic, hormonal, and urogenital health. However, they are less likely to receive adequate treatment for their chronic pain conditions.



Managing Chronic Pain

A RESOURCE FOR WOMEN VETERANS

This resource was developed for women Veterans and former servicewomen to learn more about chronic pain and pain management.

It includes information on:

- chronic pain
- why women experience chronic pain
- chronic pain and substance use
- evidence-based pain management strategies, including grounding strategies that can be used anywhere and at anytime
- how to find additional support

What is chronic pain?

Pain is a normal part of the human experience. It is a way for the body to warn us of unpleasant physical or emotional sensations. Pain can result in us thinking or behaving differently to avoid the feeling of danger.

Chronic pain is pain that lasts longer than three months. Chronic pain can occur in almost any part of the body. For some people, the pain may be continuous, while for others it may come and go.

Chronic pain is not just a result of biological factors, but also psychological, social, cultural, and environmental factors. Understanding chronic pain has many benefits. When we understand what chronic pain is and how it works, it can change the way that we think about and manage our pain.

In Canada, nearly 8 million people live with chronic pain. Women, including women Veterans, often experience more severe and recurrent chronic pain than men.

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University of Saskatchewan

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