

# The Not-So-Hidden Costs of Back Pain

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## ***Spine* Study: Back Pain Linked to Massive Prescription Drug, Overall Health Care Expenditures**

by Peter W. Crownfield, managing editor

The research findings are well-documented, and your clinical experiences undoubtedly verify it: Back pain affects nearly everyone. An estimated 80 percent of adults experience one or more episodes of back pain in their lifetime,<sup>1,2</sup> and the one-year prevalence rate is approximately 15%-20%, with some estimates as high as 40%.<sup>3</sup> However, some "experts" - ironically, those outside the chiropractic profession - have attempted to describe back pain as a harmless, self-limiting condition that requires only rest and time for resolution, despite evidence to the contrary.<sup>4</sup>

If that's the case, how do these experts explain the results of a study<sup>5</sup> published in the Jan. 1, 2004 issue of *Spine*? "Estimates and Patterns of Direct Health Care Expenditures Among Individuals With Back Pain in the United States" analyzed data from the 1998 Medical Expenditure Panel Survey (MEPS), a national survey on health care utilization and expenditures. Researchers utilized data from the MEPS for two specific purposes: to estimate U.S. health care expenditures for back pain in 1998 and to describe health care expenditure patterns among individuals with back pain during that time period.

Service Type	Per Capita Expenditures (\$)	
	Individuals With Back Pain (N = 25.9 million)	Individuals Without Back Pain (N = 172.7 million)
Office-based	\$910.0	\$425.9
Outpatient	\$460.4	\$248.8
Emergency room visits	\$102.7	\$61.5
<b>Inpatient</b>	<b>\$1,075.7</b>	<b>\$774.4</b>
Home health	\$105.5	\$92.2
<b>Prescription drugs</b>	<b>\$541.5</b>	<b>\$340.1</b>
Total:	\$3,498.1	\$2,177.9

### Results

- **Estimated total health care expenditures for back pain sufferers were a staggering \$90.7 billion in 1998.** Expenditures for inpatient care accounted for the largest proportion of total expenditures (\$27.9 billion), followed by office-based visits (\$23.6 billion).
- **Prescription drugs accounted for more than 15% of the total health care expenditures (\$14.1 billion) incurred by back pain sufferers.** By the authors' best estimates, drug expenditures accounted for greater than 10% of total

incremental expenditures - a substantial jump compared to previous research that estimated drug expenditures at less than 1% of all costs for back pain. The authors note that **prescription drug expenditures for back pain have increased more rapidly than any of the other service expenditures.**

- Health care expenditures were not equally distributed: "For each health service, the 10% most expensive individuals accounted for >50% of the service expenditures. **The 25% most expensive individuals accounted for >75% of the service expenditures.** ... This pattern was particularly clear for inpatient care, outpatient services and emergency room visits."
- **Average health care costs incurred by individuals with back pain were approximately 60% higher than those without back pain.** These average costs were determined by summing overall health care expenditures, then dividing total expenditures by the number of individuals in each group (individuals with back pain and individuals without back pain) to estimate total health care expenditures per person in the U.S. in 1998. (See **Table 1.**)