# The burden of musculoskeletal conditions

Mary Ingram

Deborah PM Symmons

## Abstract

Musculoskeletal conditions (MsCs) are a major burden to the individual, society and the health service. One in five of all general practitioner consultations involves a patient with an MsC. The main consequences of MsCs are chronic pain and physical disability. Back pain is the most common type of musculoskeletal pain. The most common form of inflammatory arthritis is rheumatoid arthritis, and the most common form of non-inflammatory arthritis is osteoarthritis. MsCs can affect individuals of any age and sex. The prevalence of MsCs is higher in women than men and rises with age. The prevalence of certain MsCs can be influenced by ethnicity, lifestyle factors and genetic predisposition. MsCs are among the most commonly reported causes of work-related ill-health. The costs of MsC include those to healthcare services and to society, as well as indirect costs. Rheumatoid arthritis alone costs the UK economy £3.8–4.8 billion per year. The burden of MsCs is high, and the impact of these conditions on the health service and society will continue to rise as life expectancy increases.

**Keywords** Cost; disability; epidemiology; incidence; morbidity; mortality; musculoskeletal; prevalence; rheumatic; risk factors

## Introduction

The term 'musculoskeletal conditions' (MsCs) encompasses a wide range of conditions that affect the muscles, bones, soft tissue, joints and spine. All ages are affected, from the very young to those in extreme old age. Together, MsCs are a major burden to the individual, society and health services.

MsCs can be grouped according to the region of the body affected (e.g. back pain, neck pain, knee pain); according to whether they are inflammatory (e.g. rheumatoid arthritis (RA), gout) or non-inflammatory (e.g. osteoarthritis (OA), osteoporosis); or according to whether the condition is confined to the musculoskeletal system or generalized (e.g. systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), other connective tissue diseases).

***Mary Ingram*** *MSc MCLIP is Librarian/Information Officer at the Centre for Musculoskeletal Research, Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health, University of Manchester, UK. Competing interests: none declared.*

***Deborah PM Symmons*** *MD FRCP is Emeritus Professor of Rheumatology and Musculoskeletal Epidemiology, Centre for Musculoskeletal Research, Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health, University of Manchester, UK. Competing interests: none declared.*

## Key points

- Musculoskeletal conditions (MsCs) are a major burden to the individual, society and the health service
- Around 21% of the adult population consults their GP each year about an MsC
- Although all ages can be affected, the prevalence is higher in female patients and rises with age
- MsCs are the most common cause of work-related illness and the second most common cause of loss of time from work in the UK

## Occurrence

Estimates of the number and type of cases of the different MsCs are useful in healthcare planning, although these estimates differ depending on which level of care is assessed. For example, non-specific musculoskeletal pain such as back pain accounts for a greater proportion of the healthcare burden at the community level than at the general practice or the hospital sector level.

### Incidence

There are no recent estimates of the incidence of all MsCs combined. In 2001 the number of new presentations of musculoskeletal disease in general practice in the UK was 947 per 10,000 persons but differed between the sexes: 832 per 10,000 for males, 1057 per 10,000 for females.[1] Most new musculoskeletal consultations in the UK were for self-limiting conditions (soft tissue rheumatism, chronic widespread pain, arthralgia). Among persistent conditions, new presentations of OA were 10 times more common than those for RA (Figure 1). In 2006–2009, the self-reported incidence of work-related MsCs was 670 per 100,000, and the general practitioner (GP)-reported incidence was 684 per 100,000.

### Prevalence

In any one year, 20% of the adult population consult their GP with an MsC. The most recent data on the prevalence of MsCs come from the Consultations in Primary Care Archive database, based in the West Midlands, UK.[2] The overall prevalence of MsCs in 2010 was 1967 per 10,000 in primary care only, and 2143 per 10,000 in primary and secondary care combined. Back pain was the condition most commonly reported (Figure 2). The prevalence of all MsCs combined increased with age, from 5% in those aged <15 years to >31% in those aged >50 years, and was higher among women.

In 2016, 18% of the UK population was aged 65 years and older.[3] This is expected to increase to 24% by 2041, and, in turn, the proportion of people of working age will decrease. With increasing life expectancy, the prevalence of MsCs can be expected to increase, leading to a rise in consultation rates and GP workloads, and an increase in demand for services, especially from elderly patients.

Results from the 2011 General Lifestyle Survey suggested that 7.1 million UK adults (13.9%) – 2.8 million men and 4.3 million women – reported having a long-standing condition relating to the musculoskeletal system.





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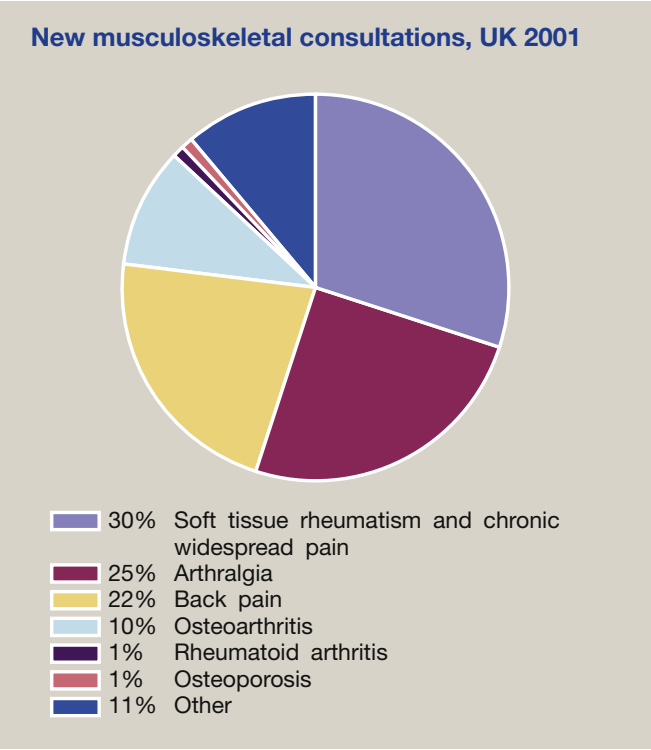


**Figure 1** From the General Practice Research Database 2001.[1]

## Mortality

Owing to the long-term nature of MsCs, they can be under-reported on death certificates as an underlying cause of death. In the UK in 2015, there were 4559 deaths (1539 in male patients, 3020 in female patients) attributed to diseases of the musculoskeletal system and connective tissue.[3] There is a variation in which International Classification of Diseases codes are used to classify deaths attributed to MsCs in the UK. In Scotland in 2015, 34% of musculoskeletal deaths were attributed to RA or OA. The equivalent figure for Northern Ireland was 31%. In England and Wales, 19% of deaths were attributed to RA and juvenile arthritis (figures for OA were not available).

Some MsCs are associated with premature mortality caused by associated co-morbidity. There is compelling evidence for an association between early mortality from cardiovascular disease and RA, and some evidence for an association with other forms of inflammatory arthritis. However, improved and more aggressive treatment of inflammatory arthritis in recent years seems to be leading to a decline in cardiovascular mortality.

## Cost

MsCs have an extensive economic impact. Direct costs of MsCs include those borne by the healthcare services, such as drugs, physiotherapy, GP attendances, hospital referrals/admissions and surgery. In the 2014–2015 financial year, the costs of patient admissions for MsCs were £4.1 billion.[4]

Costs to society include disability pensions and incapacity benefits. Some societal costs, such as loss of employment, productivity or early retirement, are indirect and difficult to quantify. Finally, there is the cost to the individual, their friends and their family. This includes time spent attending appointments and providing informal care and transport costs.

Each year, approximately 31.6 million prescriptions (single items on a prescription form) are dispensed for musculoskeletal and joint diseases, and drugs affecting bone metabolism in England and Wales. In the 2014–15 financial year, the National Health Service funded just over 145,000 major hip and knee procedures, costing approximately £977 million. A large proportion of these were joint replacements. In the same year, in

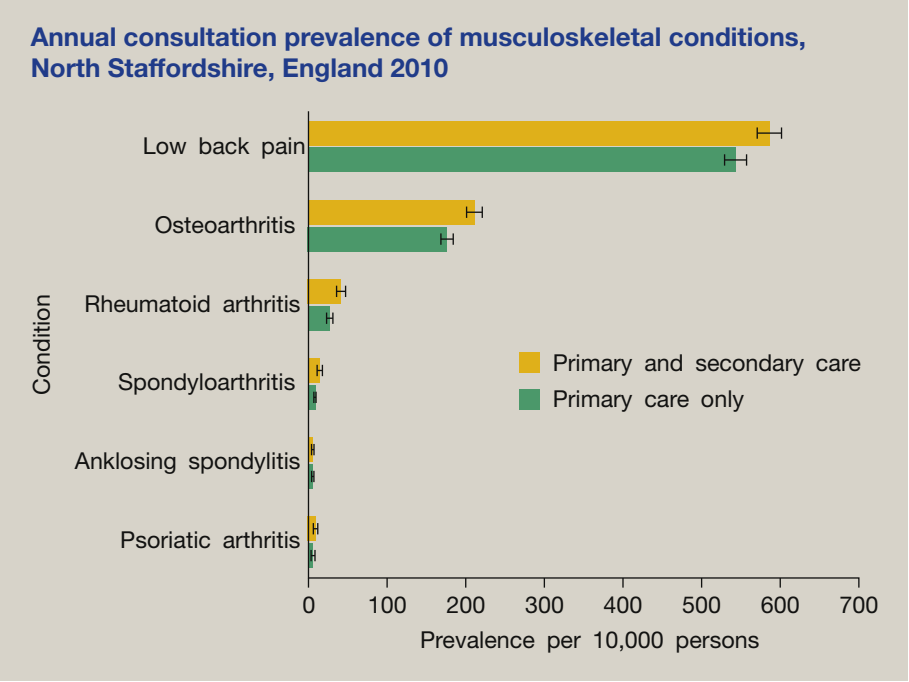


**Figure 2** From the Consultations in Primary Care Archive database, West Midlands, UK.




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