



A woman with a black headband, wearing a light blue tank top and leggings, is walking on a path. She is using two black trekking poles. The background is a lush green field with a white grid pattern overlaid on the top right. The image is framed by a green border.

# Moving for Musculoskeletal Health

The Nuffield Health Joint Pain Programme

# Foreword

Steve Gray,  
Chief Executive Officer

As the UK's largest healthcare charity, we're dedicated to building a healthier nation for all. As such, I am extremely proud of what we have achieved through the Joint Pain Programme since its inception five years ago.

We have supported thousands of people to manage their condition by living more active lives, and we have contributed significantly to the growing evidence base in favour of holistic, community-based interventions. Not only this, we have built a skilled workforce within our network of Fitness and Wellbeing Centres who are directly helping to reduce the burden on the healthcare system at a time when our NHS is under great strain.

Musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions remain high on the nation's health 'to do' list – and rightly so. Our Healthier Nation Index recently shone further light on the difficult challenges experienced by people living with chronic joint pain, with worse physical, mental, and financial health compared to people without these conditions. These findings remind us of the urgent need to deliver effective support at scale, and to ensure that it is accessible to all.

It is therefore vital that we don't stand still; we will continue to share our insights, evolve our model and forge new partnerships. Together, we can make a profound impact, transforming lives and building a healthier nation for everyone.



# The story so far

Dr Davina Deniszczyc,  
Charity and Medical Director

Over 20 million people in the UK are currently living with MSK conditions such as arthritis and joint pain.

For many, the physical pain and discomfort can have far-reaching consequences. Reduced mobility can make it difficult to work or socialise with friends and family, and may even lead individuals to feel confined in their own homes. This can lead to a vicious cycle whereby the inability to live an active and fulfilling life leads to further stress and anxiety, which reduces the body's capacity to manage pain.

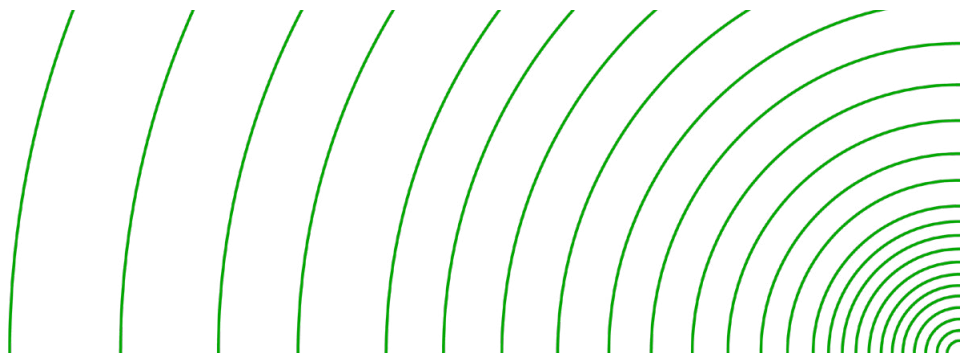
The impact of chronic MSK conditions is also having a significant impact on the NHS, accounting for one in seven GP appointments in England. While there is rightly a renewed focus on addressing MSK conditions to relieve current pressures on our healthcare system, the challenges are not new. As a practicing GP, it was always a great source of frustration that the options for my patients in terms of support and rehabilitation were severely limited.

It was this unmet need that Nuffield Health set out to address in 2018 when we initiated our first pilot intervention for osteoarthritis. At that time, it was already widely accepted that people with chronic pain would benefit from exercise and physical activity. But it was also clear that conditions can only be effectively managed when people are supported to make →



20  
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long-term changes to their lifestyle – something that our healthcare system simply isn't set up to do.

In response, we designed a clinically effective programme to reduce pain and enhance wellbeing that would not only make a lasting impact on people's lives, but which could also be accessed for free in a community setting by those who needed it most.

Five years since we began our journey, the Joint Pain Programme is being delivered by more than 140 trained Rehabilitation Specialists at over 110 sites across England, Scotland and Wales. Over 20,000 people have benefitted from the programme, delivering benefits not only to those participants but also to their families, the NHS and the wider economy. In 2022 alone, the programme generated over £52 million in Social Value.

While we will continue this work, the scale of the national challenge means that our contribution can only go so far. Collaboration is more important than ever. In this report, we share our experience to date and offer the Joint Pain Programme as a tried and tested template, with the aim of fostering new partnerships and supporting even more people who are living with chronic conditions.



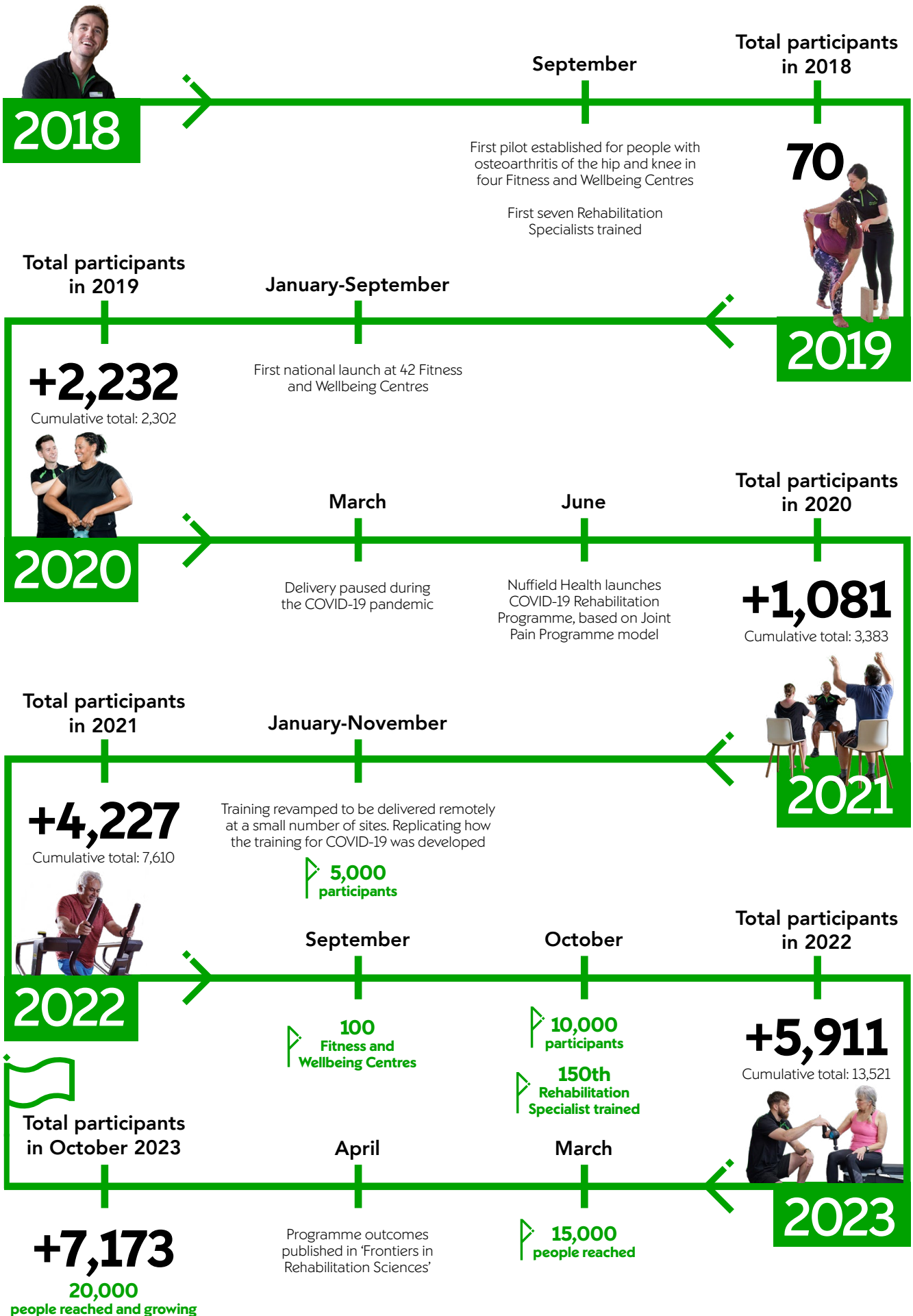
**20**  
**thousand+**

people in the UK have benefitted from the Joint Pain programme

**£52**  
**million**

of social value generated in 2022 alone

# Over 20,000 people supported...



# For the whole person

Marc Holl, National Lead for Primary Care

The Nuffield Health Joint Pain Programme can be accessed by people experiencing a wide range of chronic MSK conditions including osteoarthritis, fibromyalgia and lupus. But regardless of the label given to their particular condition, we know that each individual starts the programme with their own specific set of circumstances.

Designed by our clinical team, this is an evidence-based programme which continues to be modified as updated clinical guidelines and research are released, ensuring our programme remains both safe and effective.

We also know that the physical and mental aspects of an individual's experience are intrinsically connected. As such, the programme has been designed to adopt a 'biopsychosocial' model to support both short- and long-term benefits.



## For the whole person



Offering a combination of education, low-impact physical activity and emotional wellbeing support, which can be tailored to each individual.

## Empowering



An initial assessment is used to understand the participant's goals as well as their current activity levels. The programme is then personalised with the aim of delivering incremental increases in activity levels to improve strength and stamina. The educational component helps participants to understand this process, so that they are empowered to make informed decisions after the supported phase.

## Social



The programme is delivered in small groups of up to 12 people, which fosters a sense of community and peer support, enabling individuals to help and encourage each other.

## Clinically governed



Clinically governed by a Multi-Disciplinary Team, but delivered in a non-clinical setting by upskilled fitness professionals called Rehabilitation Specialists.

## Accessible



Completely free to access, with individuals able to apply directly or to be referred by a clinician.

“Small groups help people to open up. The 20-minute chat that we do prior to the exercise component is as beneficial as the exercise part – friendships are formed and ideas are bounced around about how to manage any pain.”

Joanne Pritchard Rehabilitation Specialist, Telford



### Who could benefit from the Joint Pain Programme?

People who have suffered with chronic pain for many years can benefit from the programme, including those with no formal diagnosis as well as those with conditions such as:

- Osteoarthritis
- Psoriatic arthritis
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Other arthritis
- Gout
- Fibromyalgia
- Spondylitis
- Lupus

The programme is free and open to anyone living with joint pain. Participants do not have to be a Fitness and Wellbeing Centre member to join and are under no obligation to continue using Nuffield Health after the programme ends.

For those whose pain is very severe, or have surgery scheduled within 12 weeks, it may not be possible to take part.



Scan the QR code to listen to [Vivienne's story](#)

# The pathway



Scan the QR code to listen to [Julia's story](#)



# Debbie's story

“It's been me and four walls at home... but now I've re-claimed some of my independence”



Scan the QR code to listen to [Debbie's story](#)

When Debbie was diagnosed with fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome she became housebound, relying on her immediate family for company and support. Before her symptoms started she led a busy and active life – managing large teams of people at work, spending time with her family and attending exercise classes.

“I loved work and the sense of accomplishment that comes from managing large teams of people, but when pain crippled my whole body and I was unable to work, I lost all my confidence.

“Life's been on pause since my diagnosis in 2015, and I've been desperately clinging on to hope of getting the 'old me' back again. The pain I feel is constant and you're left with little hope of ever gaining some form of 'regular life' again.”

Debbie's sister recommended that she try Nuffield Health's programme. “The wonderful

team at Nuffield Health in Medway made me feel at ease being in a fitness environment. I was nervous, but the whole place has this special community feel to it.

“The Joint Pain Programme is wonderful, I am feeling more confident in myself and social again – at long last! There's a great group of us on the programme together and we've started a WhatsApp group where we keep in touch and are aiming to meet up regularly. Everyone is so inclusive and supportive.

“This programme has given me a new life, it supports all of me – both physical and my mental wellbeing. And I have more mobility now, plus after the programme I know what I'm doing when I'm let loose on the machines on the gym floor!” laughs Debbie.

“For the first time in a long time I've re-claimed some of my independence and gotten a whole load of confidence back.”

# The role of Rehabilitation Specialists

Stephen MacConville,  
Senior Fitness Educator

I was now  
working to  
“live again,  
instead of  
just living  
to work.”

Carla,  
former participant



## What is your role at Nuffield Health?

I oversee the Learning and Development for all of our clinical “Programmes For All”, including the Joint Pain Programme. I lead on developing the learning pathways to upskill our Personal Trainers and turn them into Rehabilitation Specialists (RS’s). I have been lucky enough to be involved in the development of the programme since the very beginning, and have been really happy to see it grow and develop over the last five years.



## How important is the role of the Rehabilitation Specialist?

It is fundamental to the successful delivery of the Joint Pain Programme. Without these fantastic individuals, there would be no programme. Regular and supportive contact throughout both the supported and independent phases helps to maintain levels of motivation and embed the long-term positive changes we want to see. The RS’s lead on how to holistically supervise pain conditions, embedding the autonomy in our participants to self manage their own conditions moving forward.



Scan the QR code to listen  
to [Carla's story](#)

### **Q Who can become a Rehabilitation Specialist?**

Our Rehabilitation Specialists all start out as qualified Personal Trainers, and undergo further training to enable them to support people with a range of chronic conditions. When we select people for the role, we are looking for those with a real drive to help inactive people become active. It's vital that they can supplement their knowledge of health and fitness with the ability to offer empathetic support to people who are facing significant challenges and lacking confidence and self-belief.

### **Q What training do Rehabilitation Specialists receive?**

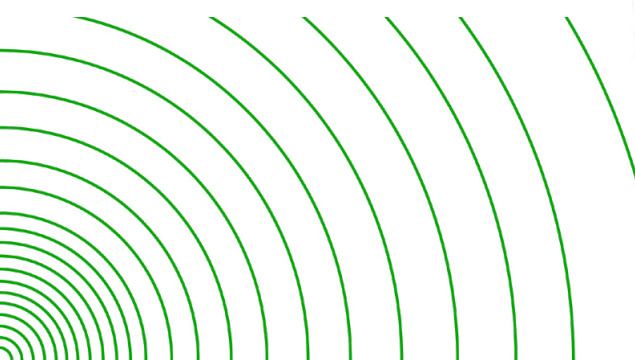
A key objective of the training is to ensure that our fitness professionals really understand what it is like to live with joint pain, so that they can respond to individual needs. Our trainee specialists learn all about the types of joint pain, the 'pain cycle' and the impact that can have on a person. Importantly, they learn about the way pain affects people in different ways, and that lifestyle factors have a big role to play. The course also covers how to take accurate health measurements, how to assess and individual's risk and how to run an inclusive group session effectively. Importantly, Rehabilitation Specialists are given training on how to support an individual's emotional wellbeing.

### **Q How long does it take to become a Rehabilitation Specialist?**

All our specialists start out as qualified Personal Trainers which takes about six to 18 months to become fully qualified. The additional training that we provide is delivered through a combination of online learning and in-person classroom time, as well as on-the-job development. Our training takes about two months to complete, and we are lucky enough to have a great mix of highly experienced Rehabilitation Specialists as well as many younger, highly enthusiastic people entering the workforce.



“When we select people for the role, we are looking for those with a real drive to help inactive people become active.”



# Janine's story

Janine is a Rehabilitation Specialist at Cannock Fitness and Wellbeing Centre. At a young age, she was diagnosed with debilitating musculoskeletal conditions and was told by doctors that it was unlikely that she would ever walk again.

After 16 surgeries, some major setbacks and a lot of hard work, Janine was able to fully regain her mobility. She went on to qualify as a Personal Trainer in 2018, and became a Rehabilitation Specialist at Nuffield Health in March 2021.

Now, Janine draws on her personal experience to support others through the Joint Pain Programme.

“With the odds stacked against me I had accomplished what I'd set my mind on. I'd defied my prognosis, regained control, improved my quality of life and not allowed my disability to define me. As a Rehabilitation Specialist for Nuffield Health, I now have the privilege of being the proud supportive person, willing others on and seeing them achieve what they put their minds to.”

**“I'd defied my prognosis, regained control, improved my quality of life and not allowed my disability to define me.”**



Scan the QR code to listen to [Janine's story](#)

# Measuring Impact

Professor Benjamin Kelly,  
Data Director

Understanding the impact of our programmes is fundamental to our approach at Nuffield Health. The rigorous collection and analysis of data allows us to continuously adapt and improve our programmes, thereby maximising the benefit we can offer to people living with long-term conditions.

It also allows us to contribute to the body of clinical evidence, meaning that others can benefit from our insights and build on what we have achieved. That's why we published our findings from the programme in a peer-reviewed journal, *Frontiers in Rehabilitation Sciences*, in April 2023; within six months this paper had already been accessed over 1,500 times.

To build our understanding we begin collecting data from the very first interaction we have with our Joint Pain Programme participants, to enable us to track their improvement over time. We look at indicators such as improvement in joint function, reduction in pain and reduction in stiffness, with participants asked to report scores at regular intervals over a two-year period. In each of these areas, we see significant improvements.

Average improvement in  
participant scores

↑ 36%  
Overall joint pain

↑ 37%  
Joint function

↑ 28%  
Joint stiffness

↑ 25%  
Mobility



Read our published research in  
[Frontiers in Rehabilitation Sciences](#)

It's also important to capture the impact that the programme is having on quality of life, and as such we also look at broader measures of wellbeing. Here, we also see some very encouraging outcomes. Even a marginal gain in these areas would have significant real world benefits, so the improvements we see in life satisfaction, perceptions of life being worthwhile and happiness are truly transformational.

At Nuffield Health we are also keenly aware that, beyond the direct effect on individuals, ill-health has a far wider-reaching impact – on friends and families, on local healthcare services and on the economy.

Our Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework, developed with Frontier Economics, allows us to understand the impact of our programme in each of these areas, and allows us to express this as a monetary value – known as Social Value.

Given that MSK conditions are estimated to cost the NHS around £6.3 billion in 2022-23\*, it is vital that we understand whether our programme is helping to save money. So far, the signs are promising, with our data showing that, on average, the programme reduces the number of GP appointments by nearly a third.

When all the wider benefits for individuals, families, the healthcare system and economy are taken into account, our Joint Pain Programme has been shown to deliver more than £12,000 for every participant who completes it. In 2022, this equated to a social value of £52 million.

\*The Kings Fund. The NHS budget and how it has changed [Online] 08 12 2022. [Cited: 21 02 2023.]

**Average improvement in participant scores**



	Measure	Observed difference following the programme	Monetary value
<b>Individual</b>	Quality of life	Average improvement in EQ-5D score: (Improvement in patients' health)	<b>0.121</b> <b>£11,309</b>
<b>Family/ carer</b>	Care hours	Average decrease of weekly care hours:	<b>1.44</b> <b>£622</b>
<b>Health and social care</b>	GP appointments	Average annual decrease of:	<b>2.28</b> <b>£195</b>
	Inpatient appointments	Average annual decrease of:	
<b>Economy</b>	Sick days	Average decrease of:	<b>1.12</b> <b>£452</b>
	Workforce participation	Unable to work: <b>5%</b> Percentage of which were able to return to work: <b>30%</b>	
<b>Total benefit for average participant</b>		<b>£8,804</b> (based on 70% of all participants completing the programme)	<b>Total benefit for programme completer</b> <b>£12,578</b>

# Campaigning for a healthier nation

Mary O'Reilly,  
Chief Communications  
Officer



# 80%

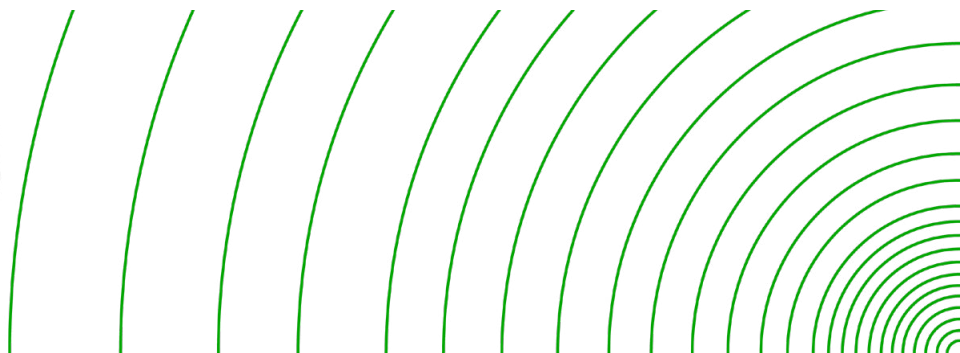
of women have suffered from or are currently suffering with joint pain

Central to our purpose as the UK's largest charity is shining a spotlight on areas of unmet need and contributing our expertise in the search for sustainable solutions to the nation's health challenges.

One of the ways we do this is through our annual [Healthier Nation Index](#), a survey of 8,000 adults which offers one of the most detailed reviews and barometers of all aspects of physical and mental health in the UK.

In 2023, our Index revealed the particular impact that joint pain is having on women across the UK. Our data highlighted that nearly half of females surveyed with joint pain said it impacted their sleep (47%), physical health and fitness (46%), and emotional wellbeing (44%). Men, on average, were ten percentage points less likely to report these impacts.

Findings also showed that women are, on the whole, suffering with joint pain more, with 80% saying they had suffered with or are currently suffering with joint pain, compared to 77% of men. As well as disproportionately impacting women, the data also showed those with lower household incomes are →



“Since finishing the programme I’ve had another baby. I was petrified when I learned I was pregnant, and worried I’d regress back to my lowest. But that didn’t happen. [My Rehabilitation Specialist] was there to support me, and I saw her right the way through my pregnancy. To get all the way to the end of pregnancy, and be able to carry on – for me that’s life changing.”

Rachael, Joint Pain Programme Participant, Cannock

also suffering more, with people earning £15,000 or less being twice as likely to have joint pain than those earning over £75,000.

The Index found that the nation’s sleep is particularly impacted by joint pain, with 56% of people suffering saying their sleep had got worse in the last year, compared with 37% of people that had never had joint pain. On average, people with joint pain also get 40 minutes less sleep a night than people without joint pain.

Despite the wide-ranging impacts of the condition, one in five people dismissed it as part of the normal aging process, and only 17% of people living with joint pain were aware of what types of exercise could help.

Through our #JoinInForJointPain campaign we worked to highlight this issue and raise awareness of what people can do to help tackle it ([nuffieldhealth.com/advice-hubs/joint-pain](https://nuffieldhealth.com/advice-hubs/joint-pain)), alongside the continued provision of direct support through our Joint Pain Programme.



56%

of people with joint pain said sleep had got worse



40

minutes

the amount of sleep lost per night to people suffering joint pain



Scan the QR code to listen to [Diane's story](#)





We are extremely grateful to the former participants featured in this report for sharing their stories. The portraits and audio stories were produced in partnership with Heard Storytelling, a spoken stories company that promotes positive change. [heardstorytelling.com](https://heardstorytelling.com)

Driven by our purpose to build a healthier nation, our experts have been working together for more than 65 years to make the nation fitter, healthier, happier and stronger.

Nuffield Health provides health and wellbeing for every part of you. We believe that the best healthcare should help prevent illness by looking after mind and body. That's why our connected health and wellbeing offering spans physical and mental health – from providing mental health support or hospital care and treatment to personal training, health assessments, GP services and physiotherapy.

We work together as a team to help you achieve your health and wellbeing ambitions, championing free health and wellbeing programmes in local communities by giving more people the tools they need to live a healthy life. These programmes help people understand and improve their own health, from those living with joint pain, to helping rehabilitate people experiencing the long-term effects from COVID-19.



Find out more about us and our pioneering models of care visit [nuffieldhealth.com](https://nuffieldhealth.com) or follow us on:

