



Managing Musculoskeletal Pain in Older Adults

How Virtual-First Physician-Led Care Improves Outcomes and Costs

WRITTEN BY Vori Health Team

THE CHALLENGE

The U.S. population is aging more rapidly than ever. Currently, adults 65 years and older comprise 18 percent of the population; in 10 years, this figure is expected to jump to 23 percent ([Schaeffer, 2024](#)). With nearly one in four Americans soon to be in the senior age bracket, clinicians and payers alike are narrowing their focus on optimizing care for the health conditions that disproportionately impact older adults. This means that, for the majority of stakeholders, the spotlight shines directly on musculoskeletal (MSK) pain.

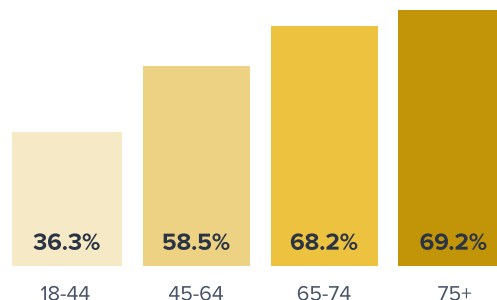
MSK pain in older adults: a common, costly, and growing problem

From age-related joint degeneration to higher fall risks resulting in serious fractures, older adults face a dramatically increased risk of chronic and debilitating MSK pain. Research indicates that **approximately 60 percent** of adults 60 years and above live with one or more MSK conditions, with many reporting pain at multiple locations in the body ([Welsh, 2020](#)).

Common MSK conditions in older adults

1. Osteoarthritis
2. Chronic low back pain
3. Degenerative disc disease
4. Spinal stenosis
5. Herniated disc
6. Osteoporosis
7. Fractures & dislocations

MSK Prevalence by Age Group



MSK conditions disproportionately affect older adults ([USBJI, 2018](#)).

As the number of older adults continues to increase relative to the total population, **the number of MSK conditions to treat will also sharply trend upwards.** That's a hefty price tag for Medicare Advantage (MA) plans specializing in providing care for this age group. The faster the U.S. population ages, the larger the portion of the \$380 billion total MSK care bill that falls onto the shoulders of MA plans ([Dieleman, 2020](#)).

However, many cost-containment and care-improvement strategies fail to effectively address the pain points and hurdles that are entirely unique to the MA member population. As a result, **plan value and member satisfaction have continued to suffer**, as seen in continual year over year decreases in Star Ratings ([CMS, 2023](#)). Likewise, a recent Commonwealth Fund survey found that one in three MA members said their plan failed to meet their expectations due to a lack of coverage for needed care, high costs, or lack of awareness or certainty about what their benefits covered ([Jacobson, 2024](#)).

The message from the data is clear: the need for better MSK care for older adults is more dire than ever, and **MA plans must adapt to put member needs first to maintain plan integrity and design viability.**

1 in 3 MA members said their plan failed to meet their expectations.

([Jacobson, 2024](#))

The right care for older adults looks different

Every MSK patient needs appropriate, evidence-based care to see a measurable improvement in their symptoms. However, for older adults, providing the right care is just the first part of the equation. **Even with the best care, seniors may struggle to see comparable improvements because many cannot consistently access their care teams.** While younger, working adults may struggle to access care due to concerns with taking time off from work or family responsibilities, older adults often face taller roadblocks to MSK care due to a number of factors.

Transportation and mobility challenges

At baseline, **seniors face disproportionately high transportation and mobility barriers:** Of the estimated 10.8 million community-dwelling older adults who rarely or never drive, **25 percent are classified as transportation disadvantaged**—and those with chronic health conditions or who rely on assistive devices are far more likely to fall into this category ([Ryvicker, 2020](#)). Adding MSK pain and restricted mobility to the mix only exacerbates these existing transportation deficits. Simply driving to a doctor's appointment or the multiple follow-up visits often required for physical therapy can pose too high of a hurdle for older adults. This is especially true for those living in rural areas who only have access to a mere **five percent** of the country's specialists ([Kwan, 2017](#)). Without a convenient way to seek care, many older adults forgo much needed treatment, causing MSK conditions to worsen

over time. As pain levels rise, so does the likelihood that older adults will eventually get shuttled from their PCPs or urgent care into a costly cycle of inappropriate imaging and surgical recommendations.

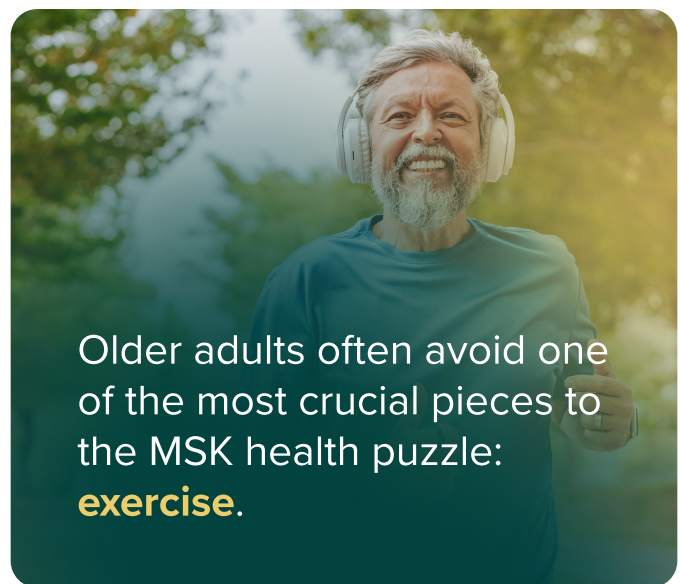
Fear of injury during exercise

Older adults often avoid one of the most crucial pieces to the MSK health puzzle: **exercise**. Regular exercise lays the groundwork for healthy MSK function by promoting strength, flexibility, endurance, and countless other whole-body improvements. However, elderly populations are often afraid to exercise — and understandably so, as these adults are at a higher risk for falls and additional injuries when exercising alone and/or without the guidance of a specialized physical therapist. However, **this fear generates a self-perpetuating cycle of more fear**, as less active individuals tend to be more worried about falling, so they refuse to exercise altogether—and the cycle repeats (Cavallini, 2022).

Medical conditions that complicate care

MSK conditions often exist at the center of an intricate web of comorbidities. According to one study evaluating MSK comorbidity rates, almost one in four people were obese, **over 36 percent** had high blood pressure, **22 percent** were smokers, **nearly 21 percent** had osteoporosis, and more than 18 percent had depression (Ziade, 2020). Many of these trends accelerates in older adults, who are especially prone to frailty, falling, and osteoporosis. To make matters worse, **the traditional MSK care paradigm often neglects**

essential aspects of whole-person care, especially healthy weight loss and mental health, leaving members alone to battle conditions such as obesity and depression which often exacerbate chronic pain. The longer a member is treated with inappropriate care, **the more complex their condition becomes**, and the longer and more extensive treatment must be to fully move the needle.



THE SOLUTION

With Star Ratings and HEDIS measures top of mind, MA plans are shifting gears to offer MSK coverage that more effectively meets the needs of older adults. This transformation begins with tailoring coverage to **include the care that directly addresses the MSK challenges that seniors face day in and day out**. In other words, MA plans are putting the member experience and outcomes first—not just by increasing the scope of coverage, but by offering the type of care their members deserve: **evidence-based, non-operative, and full-spectrum**.

Accessible, effective & appropriate: the MSK program designed for MA members

Appropriate care can only be effective when delivered at the site of service that best suits each individual. For many older adults, telehealth appointments are the ideal option, as seniors can easily access care from the comfort of home without worrying about driving themselves or asking a caregiver or family member to take them to and from their appointments. For others, in-person care may be preferred or needed, depending on the treatment plan. No matter the needs or preferences of your member population, it's crucial to partner with an MSK care team that offers both options without a change in the quality or type of care. **With Vori Health, MA members can connect with a holistic care team** that includes a specialty MSK physician, physical therapist, registered dietitian, and health coach without leaving home—while those who require in-person care can rely on Vori's hybrid network of physical therapy clinics.



A biopsychosocial care model

Vori Health's holistic care model is uniquely positioned to account for the interconnected needs and circumstances of older adults.

Virtually or in-person, **Vori Health's physician-led care teams specialize in comprehensive MSK care designed to meet the needs of older adults.** At intake, **every senior member is screened for fall risk** and triaged accordingly. Those identified at increased risk receive a customized treatment plan including a physician-supervised evaluation for medical issues that may be contributing to fall risk, targeted physical therapy to address balance, strength and mobility, as well as home safety education.

Beyond fall risk, all older adults receive assessments to monitor their **global mental and physical health**. Customized care plans include **holistic support for biopsychosocial concerns that commonly impact seniors** including obesity, anxiety, stress, isolation, sleep health, hydration, and nutrition. Throughout their care journeys, members utilize chat and AI-powered at-home exercise programs to alleviate any concerns that may arise regarding exercise, resulting in higher care plan adherence and engagement.

From a utilization perspective, Vori Health actively engages members with a dedicated engagement specialist who tailors outreach and follow-ups to member preferences, providing the education, resources, and peace of mind that members need to enroll in and engage with their covered benefit.

By combining the flexibility of care older adults require with age-specific MSK treatment, Vori Health is helping MA plans **directly improve the metrics that impact their Star Ratings and HEDIS measures**—namely, providing access to

needed treatment with high-quality care that prioritizes the member experience and drives better outcomes.

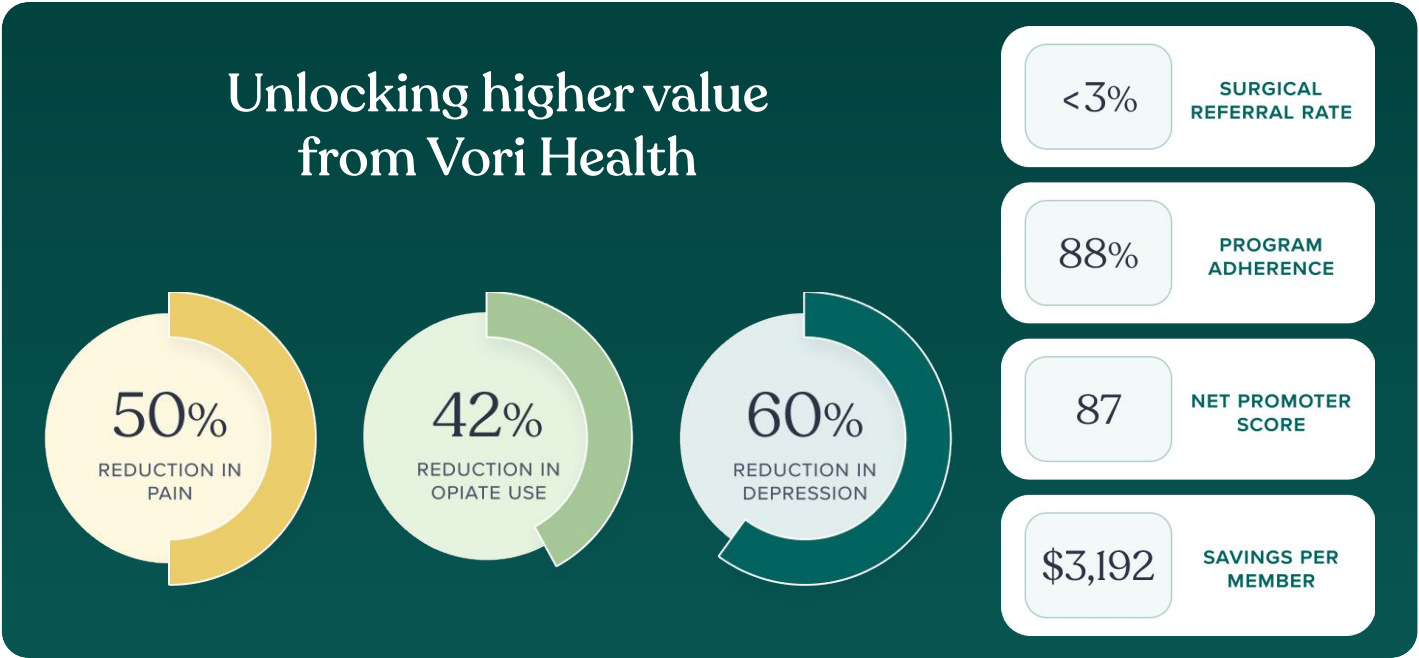
The case for virtual-first, physician-led care

Real Vori results from a regional MA plan

In July of 2023, one regional MA plan partnered with Vori Health to provide accessible telehealth MSK care for underserved member populations. The benefit offers full coverage and easy online enrollment, with a comprehensive telehealth evaluation within 48 hours. Despite initial concerns about digital adoption, **enrollment remained consistently high**, as older adults have been shown to adopt technology at a faster pace than younger adults (Lucas, 2022). In just two months, the program achieved a **remarkable improvement in pain and mental health scores while generating unprecedented plan savings with full-spectrum, non-operative care.**

Results of NPRS (Numeric Pain Rating Scale) surveys take by this cohort at baseline and at two months after beginning care with Vori Health show that **90 percent of patients report improvement in pain.** Given the complexities of treating a senior population with higher risks of multiple age-related comorbidities, as well as the fact that more than one in four older adults experience high-impact chronic pain, these results represent significant potential to improve health outcomes for the senior population as a whole.

These results are just a snapshot of the level of value that MA plans can achieve with holistic, evidence-based, and virtual-first MSK care. Talk to our team to learn how Vori Health can close the gaps in your MSK program and provide the quality of care your members need to experience long-lasting relief and get back to the activities they enjoy—all while **optimizing costs and improving ratings for your plan.**



Want to learn more about how **virtual-first, doctor-led MSK care** can improve outcomes and costs for your MA plan?

[Schedule a demo](#)

REFERENCES

- [Schaeffer, 2024](#): Schaeffer K. (2024, January 9). U.S. centenarian population is projected to quadruple over the next 30 years. Pew Research Center.
- [Welsh, 2020](#): Welsh TP, Yang AE, Makris UE. Musculoskeletal Pain in Older Adults: A Clinical Review. Med Clin North Am. 2020;104(5):855-872.
- [USBJI, 2018](#): The Hidden Impact of Musculoskeletal Disorders on Americans. (2018). U.S. Bone and Joint Initiative.
- [Dieleman, 2020](#): Dieleman JL, Cao J, Chapin A, Chen C, Li Z, Liu A, Horst C, Kaldjian A, Matyas T, Scott KW, Bui AL, Campbell M, Duber HC, Dunn AC, Flaxman AD, Fitzmaurice C, Naghavi M, Sadat N, Shieh P, Squires E, Yeung K, Murray CJL. US Health Care Spending by Payer and Health Condition, 1996- 2016. JAMA 2020;323(9):863-884.
- [CMS, 2023](#): 2024 Medicare Advantage and Part D Star Ratings. (2023, October 13). Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.
- [Jacobson, 2024](#): Jacobson G, Leonard F, Sciupac E, Rapoport R. (2024, February 22). What Do Medicare Beneficiaries Value About Their Coverage? Findings from the Commonwealth Fund 2024 Value of Medicare Survey. The Commonwealth Fund.
- [Kwan, 2017](#): Kwan MMS, Kondalsamy-Chennakesavan S, Ranmuthugala G, Toombs MR, Nicholson GC. The rural pipeline to longer-term rural practice: General practitioners and specialists. PloS ONE 2017;12(7):e0180394 _
- [Ryvicker, 2020](#): Ryvicker M, Bollens-Lund E, Ornstein KA. Driving Status and Transportation Disadvantage Among Medicare Beneficiaries. J Appl Gerontol. 2020;39(9):935-943.
- [Cavallini, 2022](#): Cavallini MF, Tredway A, Covan AJ, Dyck DJ. Lack of Time is Still the Main Barrier to Exercise and Physical Activity in the Elderly, Although Less So than Younger and Middle-Aged Participants. J Fam Med Dis Prev 2022;8(151).
- [Ziade, 2020](#): Ziade N, El Khoury B, Zoghbi M, et al. Prevalence and pattern of comorbidities in chronic rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases: the COMORD study. Sci Rep. 2020;10(1):7683.
- [Lucas, 2022](#): Lucas JW and Villarroel MA. Telemedicine Use Among Adults: United States, 2021. NCHS data brief, no 445. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2022.

ABOUT VORI HEALTH

Vori Health is a specialty medical practice delivering a virtual-first musculoskeletal (MSK) solution to help members get back to their lives faster. As the only nationwide MSK practice with doctor-led care teams, Vori Health is the most convenient way to access appropriate care for back, neck, and joint pain without bouncing around the healthcare system. Whether members need a diagnosis, non-opioid prescription, personalized physical therapy, and/or health coaching, they can turn to Vori Health for evidence-based care and effective end-to-end support. Learn how this holistic model reduces unnecessary surgeries, enables faster recoveries, and lowers MSK spend with up to a 4:1 ROI.

Let's connect!

- 🔗 vorihealth.com
- ✉️ go@vorihealth.com
- 📞 (949) 290-6932

