

The Alberta Virtual Pain Program: Phase 1 – the Alberta Virtual Chronic Pain Program

With the launch of the Alberta Virtual Chronic Pain Program in April 2024, Alberta has entered a new era in pain management by becoming the first province in Canada to offer a Provincial Chronic Pain Program. This is the first step toward a complete Alberta Virtual Pain Program, within the Alberta's Recovery Oriented System of Care.

Background

Chronic pain is defined as persistent pain lasting or recurring for 3 months or longer. In Alberta, **1 in 5 individuals** live with chronic pain (1). **In primary care, chronic pain is among the top 4 leading causes for visits** (2). In Alberta, 4 in 5 patients living with chronic pain report visit their family physician because of their pain at least once in the previous year (3). Yet, many family physicians have limited ability to provide chronic pain care using a biopsychosocial model due to barriers to accessing trained multidisciplinary providers. This is further compounded by the shortage of family physicians. **Primary care providers identify chronic pain as a top priority needing additional resources.**

Overview of the Alberta Virtual Chronic Pain Program

The Alberta Virtual Chronic Pain Program is a novel, made in Alberta and for Alberta program. The program delivers consistent quality non-pharmacological chronic pain care across the province, with a particular focus on rural communities and at-risk populations. The services include:

- Centralized nurse-led, Health Link phone line for patient intake and system navigation support;
- Group pain education and self-management support programming on AHS Zoom;
- Topic-specific programming;
- Self-led pain education and self-management support programming (under development); and
- Health channel with a repository of health information for patients and communities (under development).

The AVCPP can support primary care providers and help them effectively manage more patients within the community and primary care settings, by:

- Offering enhanced access to multidisciplinary providers with expertise in chronic pain management: mental health therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, licensed practical nurses, and peer support workers. The future plans are to employ a pharmacist, dietician, social worker, recreation therapist, and kinesiologist.
- Provides evidence-based, complimentary resources to direct patients to as part of their care plans.
- Serves as an additional point of care for patients, potentially reducing the frequency of patients' visits to the primary care provider due to chronic pain and freeing up appointments for other patient concerns;
- Teaching patients effective communication; and
- Offering provider education through consistent language and communication.

The AVCPP can be accessed through self-referral and provider referral. Provider referrals are accepted through Connect Care and the Alberta Referral Directory.

Progress and Successes

- Co-design with over 90 patients and health care providers, leading to an expedited launch in April 2024.
- Over 100 self-referrals and 20 provider referrals received in less than 2 months.
- Over 70 participants have started with the AVCPP's group programming service already, and up to 60 participants will start in summer 2024.
- A variety of session times is available, allowing patients to choose the most convenient options.
- Participants are highly satisfied with the programming, calling it an "eye-opener", and expressing hope for the future: "The program has helped me validate my mission to start finding ways of healing."

1. Thanh NX, et al. Economic burden of chronic pain in Alberta, Canada. PLoS One 2022;17:e0272638. 2. Finley, C.R., et al. What are the most common conditions in primary care?: Systematic review. Canadian Family Physician, 2018. 64(11): p. 832-840. 3. Alberta Pain Strategy and Health Quality Council of Alberta Survey. 2023