

Breaking the access block

Why virtual care is the future of workforce wellbeing



According to the latest Australian Healthcare Index (AHI) 2024, accessing medical care in Australia is becoming increasingly difficult and unaffordable. The greatest healthcare challenges facing everyday Australians include increasing out-of-pocket costs (45%) and growing emergency department wait times (40%).

Unfortunately, accessing primary healthcare in Australia can be a costly and inconvenient task. Patients face a growing number of barriers, from lengthy waits for appointments to high out-of-pocket fees and a lack of bulk-billed appointments.

The current healthcare access block crisis has very real implications for Australian employees. 60% of patients have delayed a GP visit, 32% postponed diagnostic tests, and 28% have skipped medication purchases due to cost. And with 75% reporting that recent increases in the cost of living have impacted their healthcare decisions – Australian employers should be on high-alert.

These delays in accessing appropriate, professional care can cause small issues to snowball into much larger, more serious healthcare concerns.

For regional employees living outside major cities, these roadblocks to access are even more pronounced. In fact, regional respondents identified difficulty in booking appointments (47%) as the main reason not to recommend their GP.

For employers, it's logical to assume this healthcare crisis has consequences for the morale, productivity and output of your workforce. The longer it takes employees to receive medical care, the longer they'll likely take to recover. Plus, if employees continue to show up to work while unwell, this can impact their engagement, focus and ability to perform at their best – not to mention causing potential flow-on effects for other team members, too.

With this in mind, it's not hard to believe why absenteeism, presenteeism, a decline in productivity and even an increase in employee turnover are all common outcomes of ill health going unchecked for extended periods of time.

But, the proliferation of virtual care makes it possible for employees to overcome these barriers to access and gain the personalised healthcare support they need to get back to health sooner. In this guide, we dive into the latest GP access block crisis, its implications for employees and employers, and why businesses should be leading the charge in telehealth adoption.



What is 'Primary Care'

Primary care is your first stop for healthcare, provided by professionals like GPs, nurses, pharmacists and allied health professionals. It covers everything from checkups and vaccinations to treating common illnesses and managing chronic conditions. This ongoing care is essential for staying healthy and plays a vital role in the Australian healthcare system.

Disclaimer:

This document is intended for information purposes only and should not be regarded as legal advice. Further advice should be obtained before taking action on any issue dealt with in this document.

Contents

Section one

The GP access block crisis unpacked 4

Breaking down the key challenges Australians are facing when seeking medical care.

Section two

How is this crisis impacting individuals and businesses? 10

Exploring the implications of this crisis on employees and employers.

Section three

The employer's role in boosting healthcare accessibility 13

Why businesses need to tackle the GP access block crisis head-on.

Section four

How medical support can solve this crisis 16

Discover why telehealth is the perfect solution to the GP access block crisis.

Sources and references

1. AHRI, December 2024: Quarterly Australian Work Outlook Report.
https://www.ahri.com.au/wp-content/uploads/AHRI_Quarterly-Australian-Work-Outlook-Report_December.pdf
2. Australian Healthcare Index Report, August 2024
<https://australianhealthcareindex.com.au/australian-healthcare-index-august-report/>
3. Gallup, 2024: State of the Global Workplace
<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace.aspx>
4. University of Sydney, 2024: "What employees really want."
<https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2024/05/30/what-employees-really-want.html>
5. Deloitte Insights, 2023: [Workplace Wellbeing Research]
<https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/workplace-well-being-research.html>
6. Sonder, 2023: "Workers expect help with wellbeing."
<https://sonder.io/blog/workers-expect-help-with-wellbeing/>
7. ABC News, 2016: "Presenteeism costing the economy billions."
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-12/presenteeism-costing-the-economy-billions/7318832>

The GP access block crisis unpacked



The top challenges impacting Australia's healthcare system

According to the [Australian Healthcare Index 2024](#), increasing out-of-pocket costs to see a GP is now the biggest concern among Australians. It's closely followed by Emergency Department (ED) wait times and the price of private health insurance.

Cost is proving to be a major barrier to access, with a lack of affordability leading Australians to engage with core healthcare services less often and even put off seeking support for mental health care.

A lack of affordable care is putting unnecessary strain on EDs across Australia. Nearly half of people who went to the ED said that, on reflection, they believed their care could have been provided by a GP or Urgent Care Clinic instead.

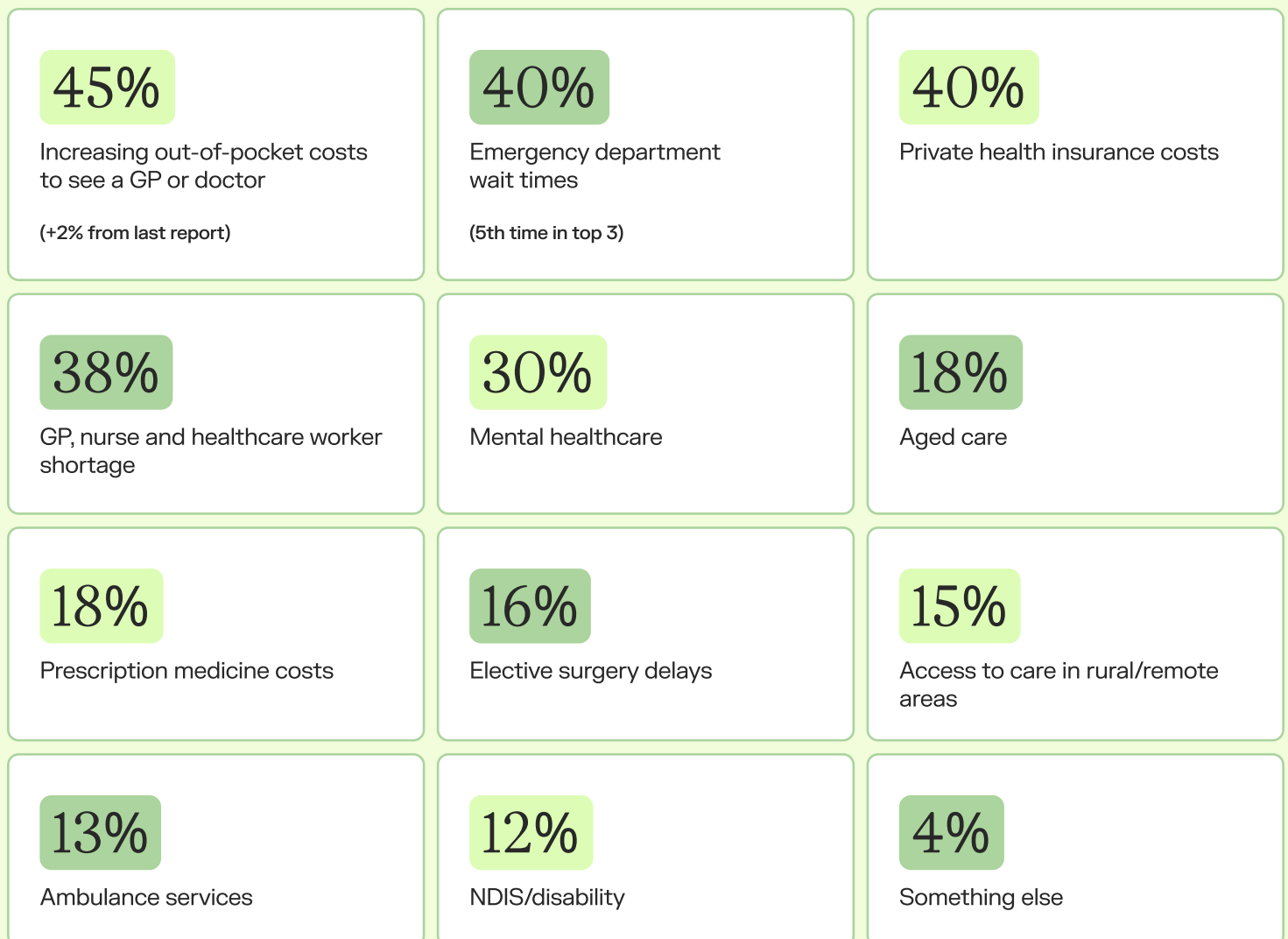


Defining 'access block'

Sonder defines access block, relating to primary care in Australia as the barriers people face in getting timely and affordable healthcare.

The top challenges for Australian healthcare

What do you think are the top three healthcare challenges for the Australian government and health industry to prioritise?



Below, we dive into three of the biggest challenges facing Australia's healthcare system.

Challenge 1: High out-of-pocket costs to see a GP

What is the 'gap payment'?

Out-of-pocket costs or 'gap payments' are what you pay for healthcare after Medicare and your private health insurance have paid their share. It's the remaining balance patients are responsible for covering.

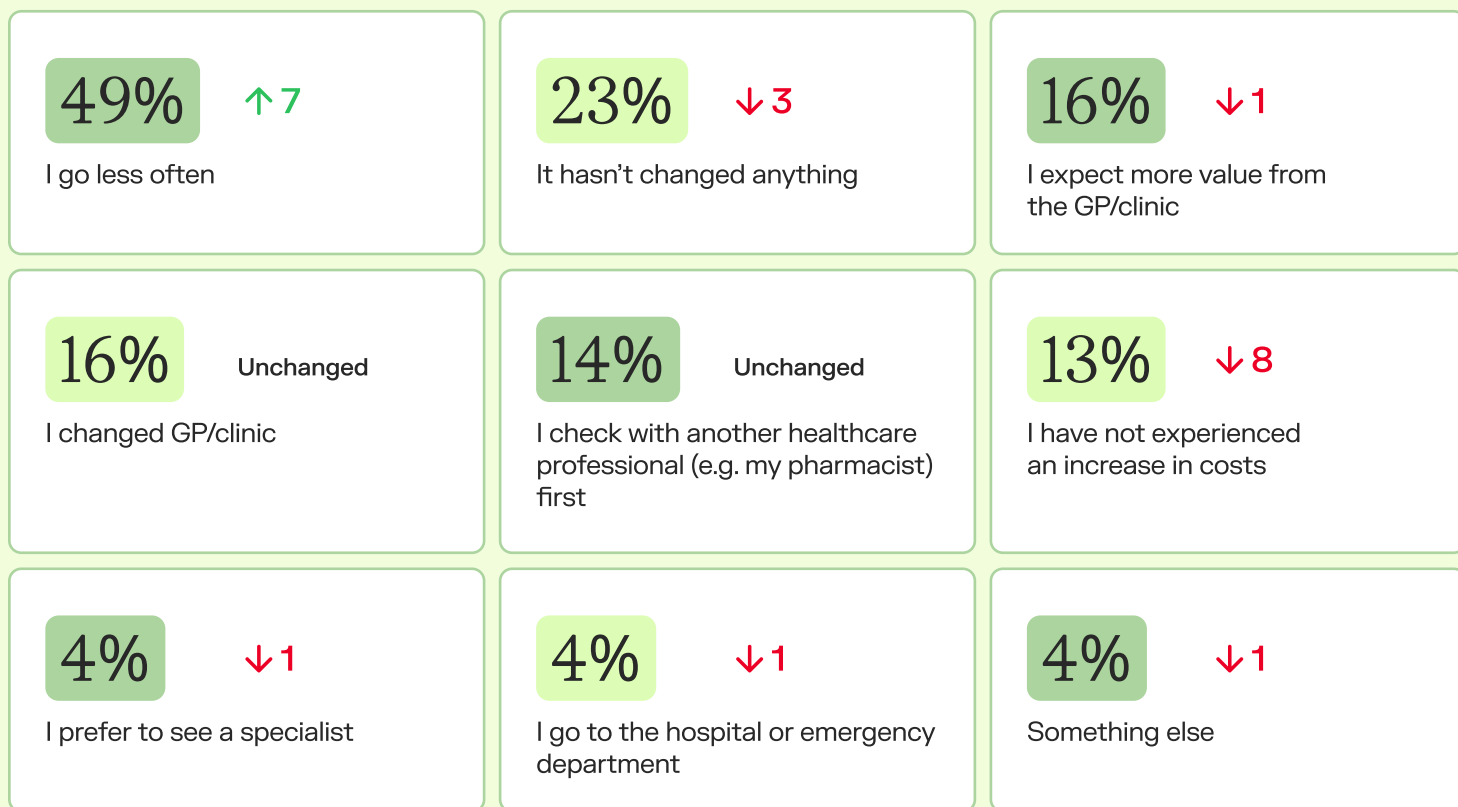
By far, the biggest challenge in Australia's healthcare system in 2024 is the high out-of-pocket costs of seeing a GP. In fact, the level of concern around this challenge has risen for three straight AHI reports.

This stat says it all: 45% of patients cite out-of-pocket costs as one of their top three healthcare concerns.

While cost was of equal concern to men and women, more than 50% of people aged 18 to 49 selected this as their top issue, along with lower-income earners between \$60k and \$180k.

Plus, increasing out-of-pocket costs were named the top reasons for not recommending a GP (43%), closely followed by GPs who don't offer bulk billing (31%).

How have out-of-pocket costs for a standard GP consult influenced you going to the GP clinic?



Bulk-billed appointments are becoming harder to find, too. In their most recent GP visit, 41% of respondents weren't able to access bulk billing, with 32% reporting they 'always' have to pay out-of-pocket costs when visiting a GP over the past two years.

Challenge 2: ED waiting times are increasing

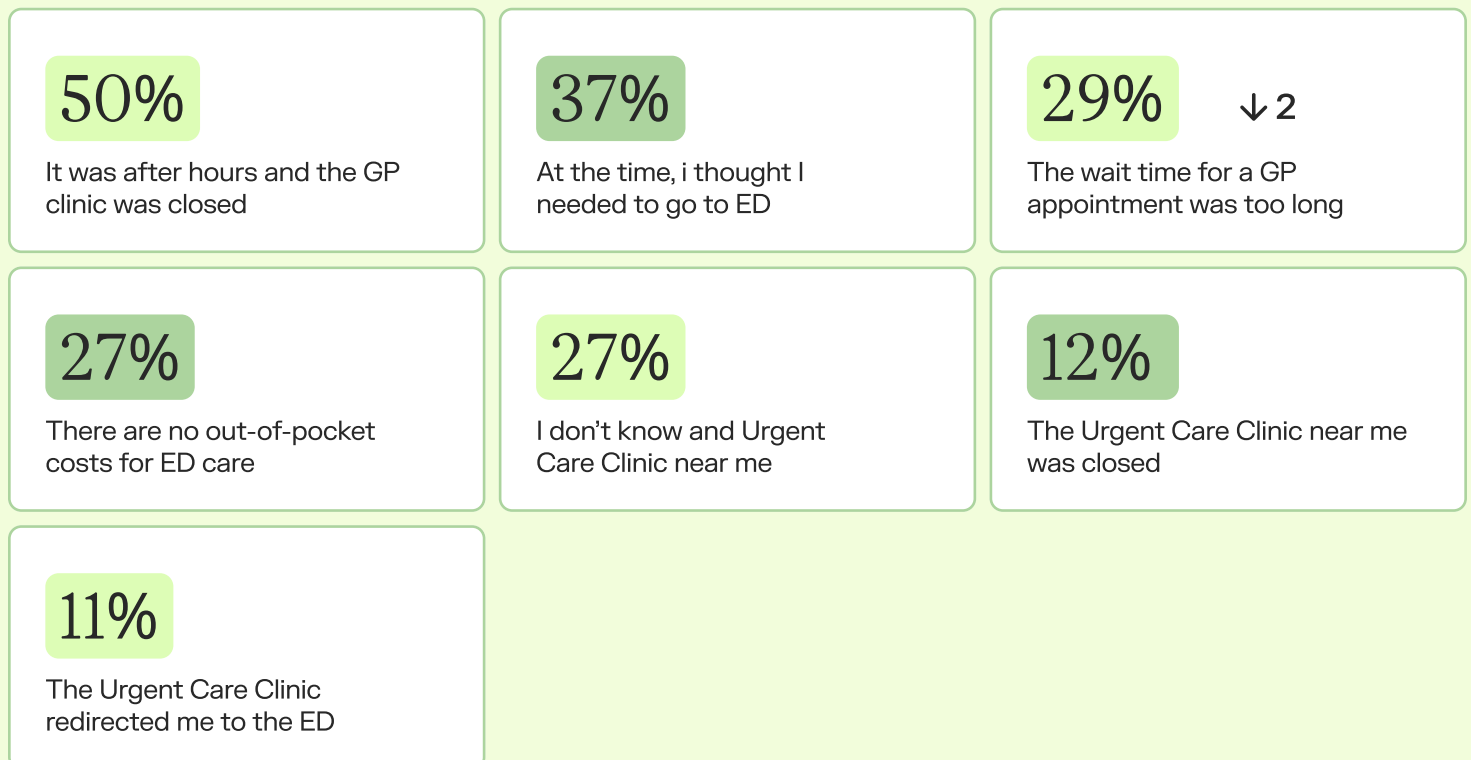
Concerningly, Emergency Department (ED) waiting times have ranked in the top three concerns among survey respondents for five years running and for female respondents, long ED waiting times ranked as their second most important concern.

So, what's causing these growing delays? ED waiting times are a complex issue, one contributing factor is this: many people presenting to the ED could likely have received care elsewhere. Without a proper triage taking place, people are often forced to make an uninformed guess about the appropriate level of treatment they require.

On reflection, 48% of respondents who presented to the ED but were not admitted to the hospital believed a GP or Urgent Care Clinic could have treated them. 50% of patients attended ED because their GP was closed.

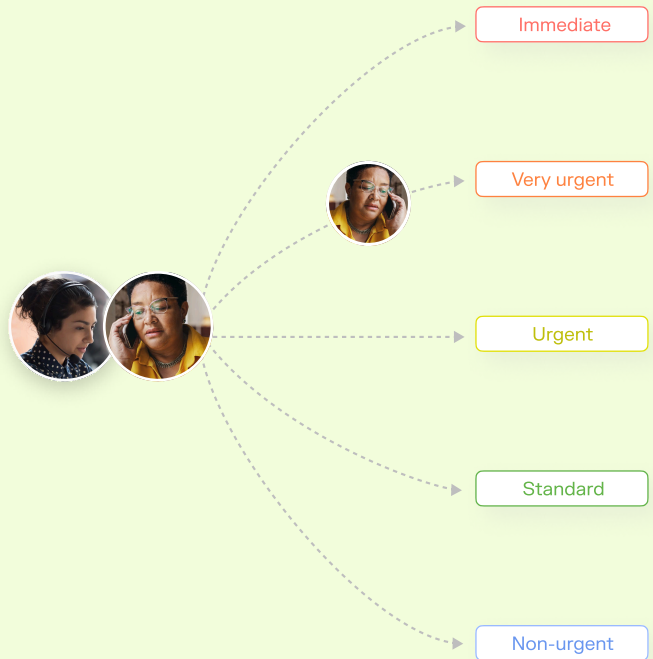
These unnecessary presentations are one of the many factors putting pressure on an already stretched healthcare system.

Reasons people selected to attend the ED



Did you know?

Sonder's clinical team can help avoid unnecessary trips to the ED by triaging and connecting people to the right health pathway, including GP telehealth.



Challenge 3: Cost-of-living pressures are delaying care

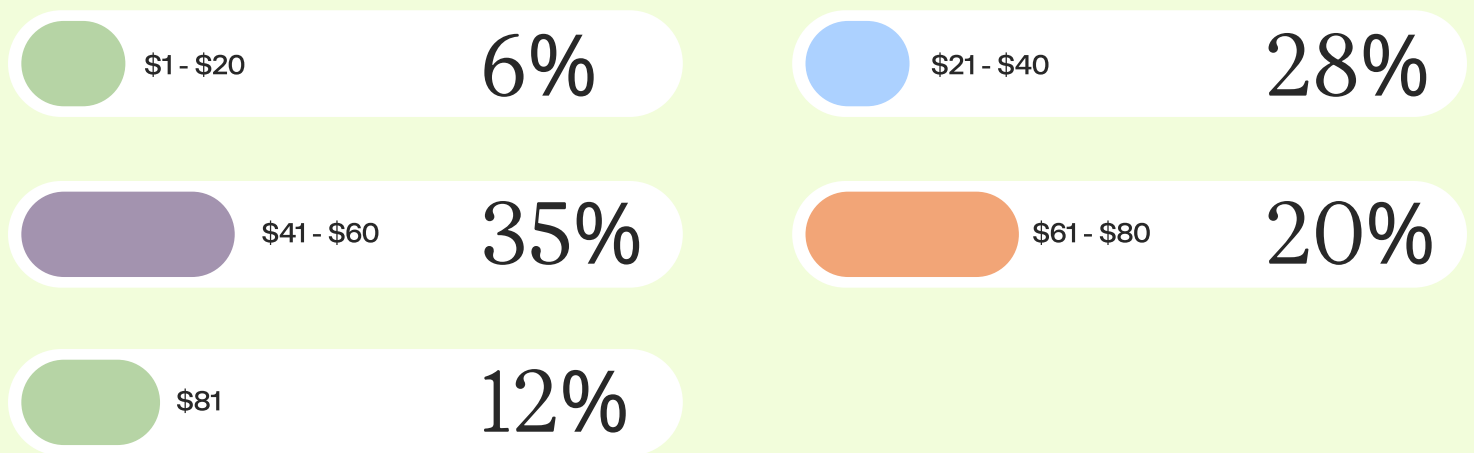
Rising inflation, stagnant wage growth and climbing interest rates are putting many Australians under financial pressure. Plus, with healthcare now coming with many out-of-pocket costs, affordability is a major concern for Australians.

This stat says it all: 75% of respondents say that recent increases in the cost of living have impacted their healthcare decisions.

Growing cost of living pressures are directly impacting how often Australians seek care, with 60% delaying a GP visit, 53% delaying dental treatment, and 32% postponing a diagnostic test or scan.

In more tangible terms, 35% of Australians are paying anywhere from \$41 to \$60 in out-of-pocket costs for a standard GP consult, with 20% even paying as much as \$61 to \$80 per visit.

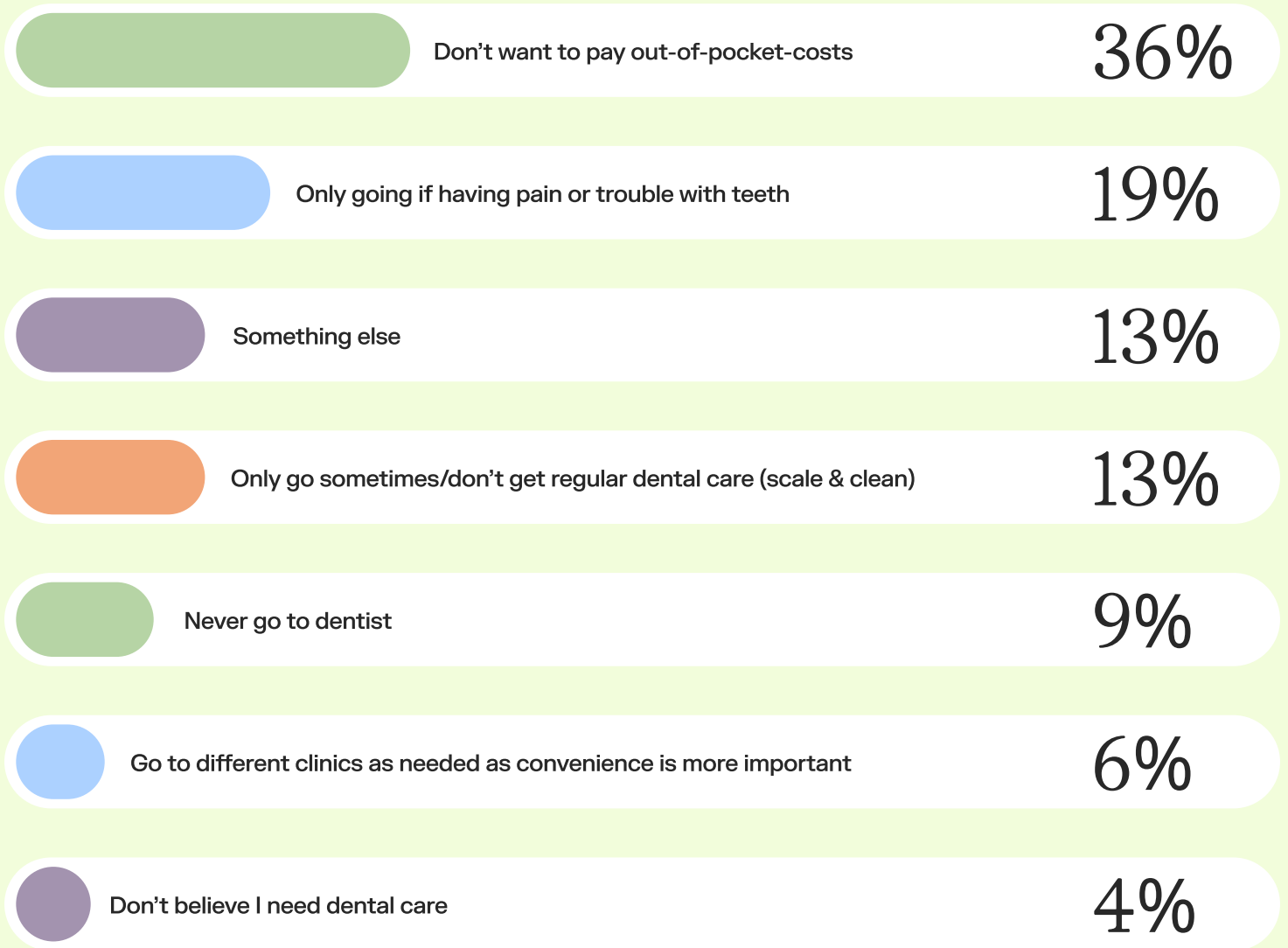
How much do you currently pay in out-of-pocket costs for a standard GP consult?



As a result, more Australians are turning to alternative payment methods to meet the growing costs of accessing care. Over half (53%) of respondents have used a credit card, and 28% have used a payment plan provider (such as buy now, pay later providers). Concerningly, 9% even dipped into the superannuation to pay for elective surgery.

When it comes to dental care specifically, unaffordability was the top reason for not recommending a dentist (63%, an increase of 5% from 2023 and a whopping 18% increase from 2022). Plus, at least 40% of respondents said they don't have a regular dentist, pointing to high out-of-pocket costs (36%) as the primary reason).

What best describes why you don't have a regular dentist/clinic?



How is this crisis impacting individuals and businesses?



As a business, you want to do everything you can to foster happy, healthy and engaged teams. Unfortunately, these barriers to accessing care have several negative consequences for employees at both the individual and company levels.

According to a recent [2023 Deloitte global survey](#), less than two-thirds of workers say their physical and mental wellbeing are “excellent” or “good” (63% and 58%, respectively). In fact, most employees say their wellbeing either worsened or stayed the same last year, and only around one-third say their health improved.

Closer to home, Australians are feeling the effects of lengthy GP wait times and high out-of-pocket costs. Below, we break down the impacts of this GP access crisis on individuals and organisations as a whole.

Impact on employees

Reduced health and wellbeing

Without access to timely care, employees may experience a decline in their overall health. For example, if a chest infection goes unchecked for an extended period of time, an individual may develop further health complications and even lose the motivation or ability to do what they love.

Unable to operate at peak performance

In a professional setting, poor health can impact an employee’s ability to operate at their best. Individuals may experience fatigue, brain fog, issues with focus or concentration, and challenges in collaborating effectively with others.

Taking unnecessary time off work

Extended periods of ill health can also lead to increased sick days or frequent absences. Individuals may even need to use their annual leave entitlements to attend appointments, particularly if they’ve already used up their sick leave entitlements.

Impact on businesses

Decline in productivity

Recent research shows that [unscheduled absence levels have increased](#) in Australian organisations over the past year, with minor illnesses accounting for 70% of unscheduled absences. Growing rates of absenteeism can lead to a drop in the productivity and output of workplaces.

Lower employee engagement

Even one ill employee can have a major impact on a team’s morale, productivity and output. If a team member is unable to treat an illness or injury, staying engaged in their work becomes increasingly difficult, too.

Higher chance of employee turnover

Employees may be less committed to staying at workplaces that don’t prioritise their health or wellbeing. If employees are struggling to access the care they need (and their employer isn’t offering tangible solutions to help), there’s a high chance this employee may look for employment elsewhere.

Counting the costs of poor healthcare accessibility

As an employer, prioritising the health and wellbeing of your employees isn't a 'nice to have'. Poor employee health can have a major impact on your business's employee retention efforts, productivity levels and bottom line.

In tangible terms, here are some of the costs your business may incur by not addressing the healthcare issues your team are facing:

Counting the costs of poor healthcare accessibility

As an employer, prioritising the health and wellbeing of your employees isn't a 'nice to have'. Poor employee health can have a major impact on your business's employee retention efforts, productivity levels and bottom line.

In tangible terms, here are some of the costs your business may incur by not addressing the healthcare issues your team are facing:

- **Absenteeism costs**

Unwell team members are more likely to take unexpected time away from work. In Australian companies, absenteeism costs, on average, \$3,500 per employee per annum, according to [data from Direct Health Solutions](#). Other research suggests that total productivity losses from absenteeism can [range between 1.4 to 2.8 times](#) the value of the impacted worker's wage.

- **Presenteeism costs**

Employees who are navigating untreated illnesses or injuries are more likely to underperform at work. In dollar terms, presenteeism has been estimated to cost the Australian economy [\\$34 billion a year through a loss of productivity](#). Some [studies](#) suggest that presenteeism costs up to 1.7x an affected employee's wage.

- **Employee turnover costs**

Research tells us that '[quality healthcare coverage](#)' is the benefit Australian workers value most, beyond income. If team members aren't able to gain healthcare support through their employer, they may be more likely to move on to a company that offers these perks. While the costs of employee turnover vary greatly, [Culture Amp's research](#) has found that this cost ranges from 30% to 200% of a person's salary.

- **Employee disengagement costs**

Employees who are navigating ill health are more likely to be disengaged in their role. [Research from Gallup](#) reveals that workforces with low engagement levels experience a 25% higher rate of absenteeism and even 62% more workplace accidents, leading to a rise in operational costs, too.

- **Productivity costs**

Employees navigating poor health are less likely to perform at their best. On the flip side, happy, healthy employees who aren't experiencing a high level of workplace stress or ill health are shown to be [12% more committed to staying](#)—helping employers lower the costs and disruptions of employee turnover, too.

The employer's role in boosting healthcare accessibility



Why proactive GP care matters

The sooner your employees receive care, the sooner they'll be on the pathway back to health. Despite the current challenges facing Australia's healthcare system, employers (like you) have an important role to play in making healthcare more accessible to your team.

“\$50 might not seem much to some, but for others it's the difference between seeing their doctor or buying lunch.”



Dr Jamie Phillips

MB ChB, AFCHSM, DIMC, RCS(Edin), MRCGP(UK), FACRRM(EM)

Medical Director, Sonder

As an organisation, here's what you stand to gain by making proactive GP care a reality for your team members:

- **Increase productivity**
Help your employees boost productivity and reduce time off work by making it easier and more affordable for them to book primary care appointments. This can prevent unnecessary face-to-face GP visits and, more importantly, trips to the emergency department.
- **Prevent the spread of ill health among your team**
From the flu to the common cold, early care and treatment can prevent infected employees from turning up to work while contagious.
- **Tackle healthcare access inequalities head-on**
While a \$50 gap payment might be manageable for some team members, for others, it may be the reason they skip a GP appointment.
- **Provide a benefit the team will actually use**
With 86% of Australians visiting a primary healthcare provider at least once a year, offering discounted access to these services is a valuable perk that sets your business apart. Investing in your team's health this way boosts retention and engagement by providing a benefit they'll actually use.
- **Boost output with healthier, happier employees**
Addressing health concerns quickly means employees are able to treat and resolve issues quickly, getting back to performing at their best and collaborating effectively with others.

Meeting the growing expectations of top talent

Attracting and retaining the right people is key to building a thriving organisation. But today's top talent expect more than just a paycheck from the companies they work for.

In fact, high-performing talent expect their employer to provide access to a range of healthcare options, ensuring these are flexible, accessible and tailored to their needs.



91% of 2,000 employees we surveyed in Australia (working a minimum of 20 hours per week across different industries) thought it was important for their next employer to offer mental wellbeing support.

Plus, [other research](#) has found that 37% of Australian workers considered their employer their main source of mental health support.

Prioritising a proactive, early-intervention approach to healthcare

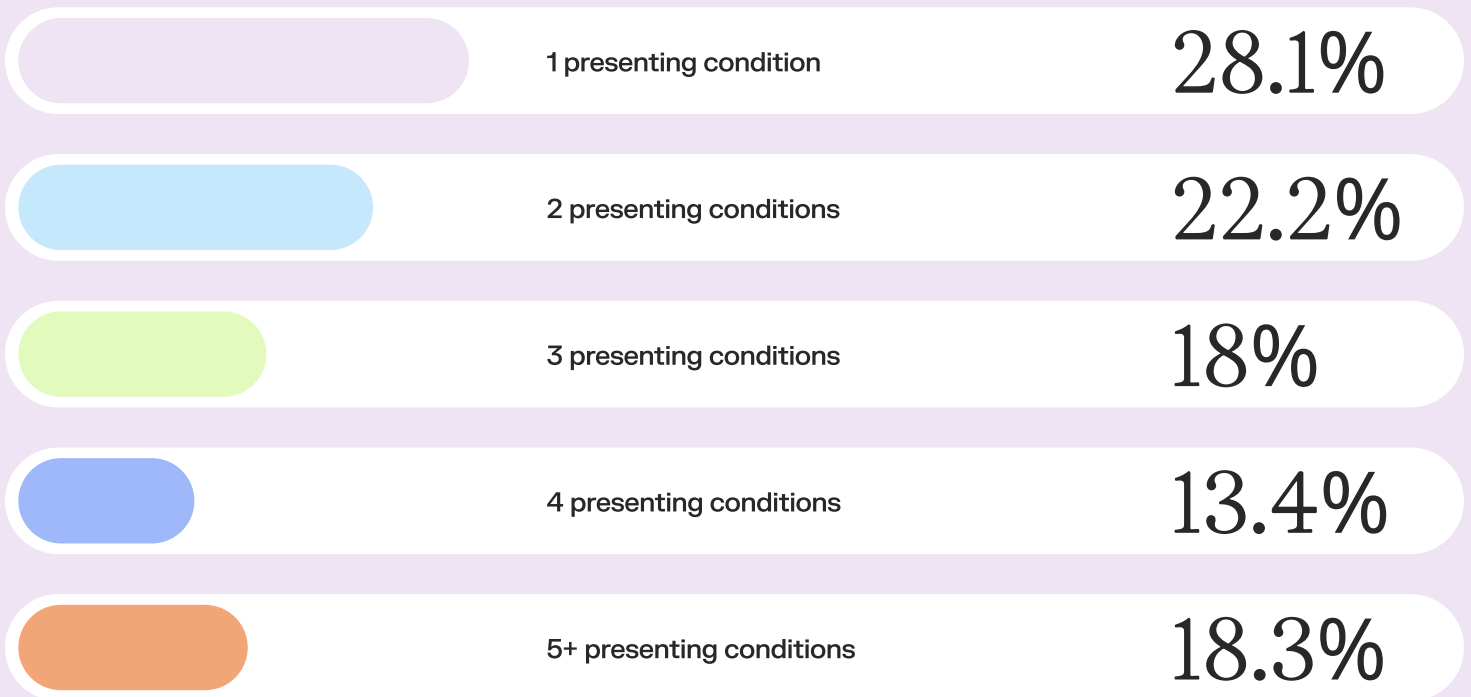
The workplace wellbeing landscape is continually evolving. The lives of employees are varied and complex, meaning the support they require needs to address all facets of their mental health, physical health and safety needs.

Research from the [McKinsey Health Institute](#) reveals that workplace wellbeing isn't just about preventing injury or illness. Instead, adopting a holistic approach to wellbeing means companies are offering access to services that look after an employee's mental, physical and even social health.



Did you know?

Employees are often navigating multiple interconnected issues at the same time. In our sample of 10,000+ anonymised member support cases from July to September 2022, we found that **71.9%** of members presented with more than one wellbeing issue, and nearly one in five people had five or more presenting conditions.

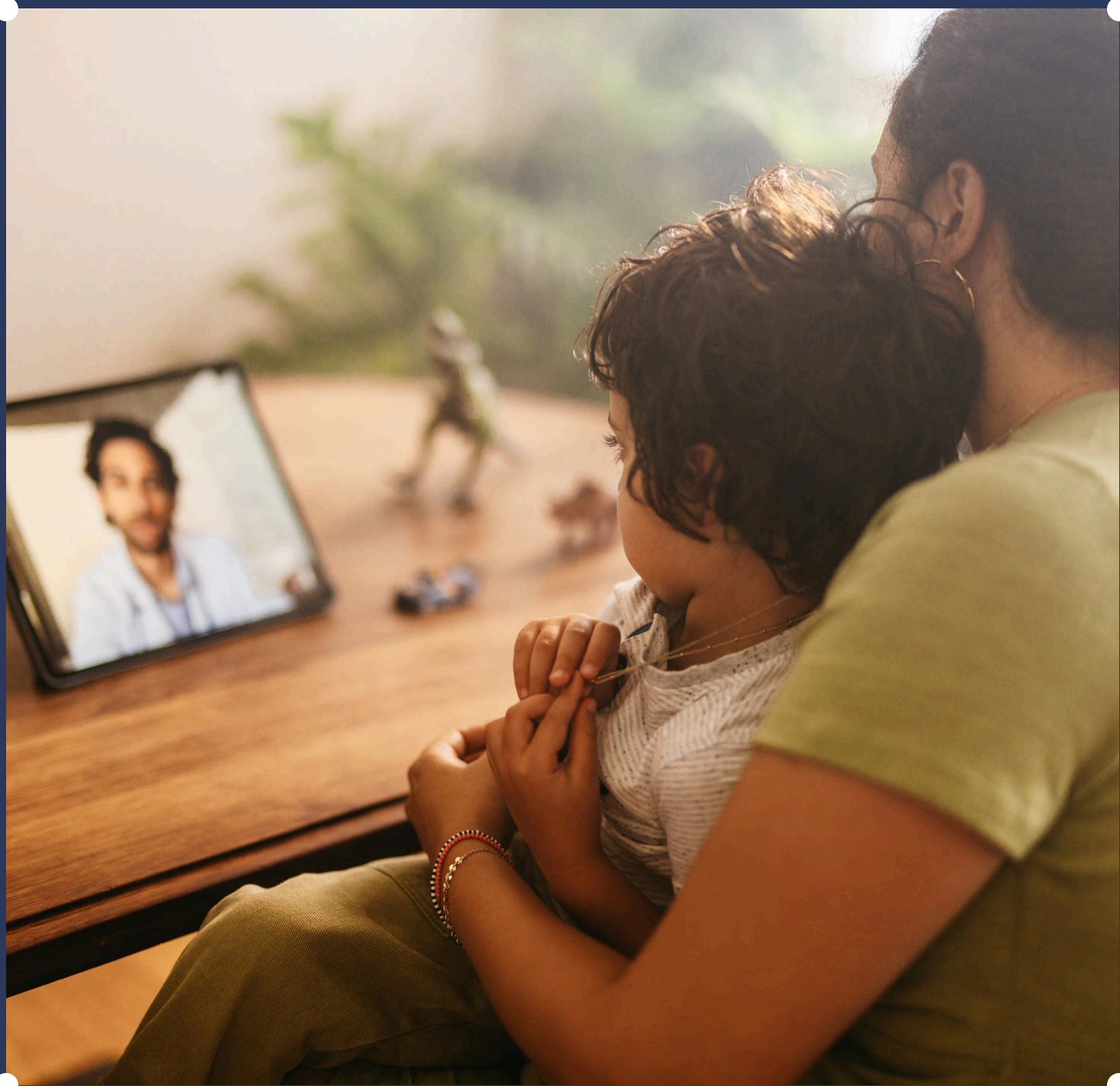


*Source: <https://sonder.io/blog/organisational-change-employee-wellbeing/>

But by adopting an early-intervention approach that allows employees to pinpoint the challenges they're facing and address issues holistically, you can deliver the right care to your people at the right time.



How medical support can solve this crisis



The growing uptake of telehealth

Despite these challenges, a clear area of opportunity has emerged in virtual care pathways, such as telehealth.

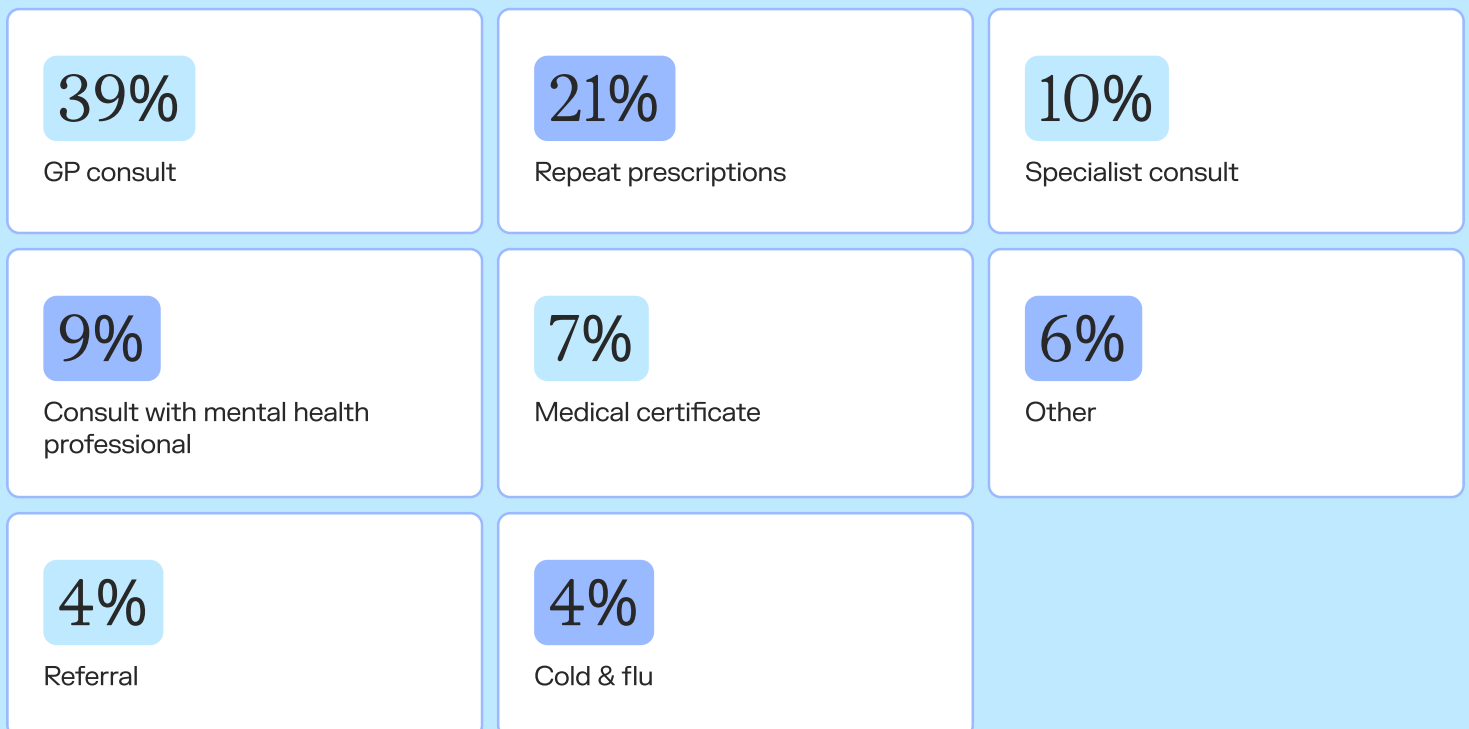
Telehealth allows individuals to meet with a healthcare provider virtually, either over the phone or via a video call. From GPs to psychologists and other specialists, telehealth appointments are a convenient way for employees to receive professional care, without leaving their homes while unwell.

The stats from the [Australian Healthcare Index 2024](#) reveal telehealth is a popular choice among Australians. 40% of patients have had a telehealth consult in the past six months. Plus, the vast majority (82%) were extremely satisfied with their telehealth consultation.

So, why are more Australians choosing telehealth consults? The benefits of clear:

- Telehealth consultations are convenient (49%), with the ability to squeeze appointments in **during an individual's lunch break or before and after their work day**.
- Telehealth consultations are a helpful alternative when patients have been waiting too long for an in-person consultation (19%).
- Plus, telehealth consultations allow patients to receive care when navigating an illness that doesn't allow them to visit an in-person clinic (18%).

What was your telehealth consult for?



Comprehensive medical support anytime, anywhere with Sonder GP Connect

Sonder's medical capabilities provide members with convenient, remote access to clinical advice, self-care guidance, and telehealth GP consultations, ensuring timely support for a wide range of health needs.

Registered nurses offer direct clinical advice for members who can self-manage their symptoms, including over-the-counter medication guidance for common conditions. Support is also available for family members under a member's care.

Our nurses may suggest a telehealth appointment with a GP, available via video or phone. This service provides remote medical support for minor ailments and ongoing conditions, removing barriers to traditional healthcare access

Through telehealth consultations, GPs in Sonder's network can perform virtual consultation(s) and if indicated supply a prescription, arrange investigations (blood tests, imaging etc) or arrange a referral for ongoing care (physical or psychological), allowing members to access medication without the need for an in-person visit. This service streamlines healthcare access, particularly for those managing chronic conditions or dealing with common illnesses.

By removing critical blockers to medical care, Sonder GP Connect can help your people stay healthier, happier, and more productive. This streamlined experience offers cost savings, reduction in lost time, simplified medical access, and ensures the right care is delivered at the right time to your people.

You are now connected with a Registered Nurse

My 1 year old has a stuffy nose and a cough. I've been using saline drops, but he's still having trouble breathing through his nose. Any other tips??

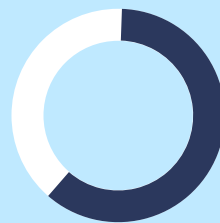


For a little one that age, saline drops are great! You could try using a nasal aspirator to...



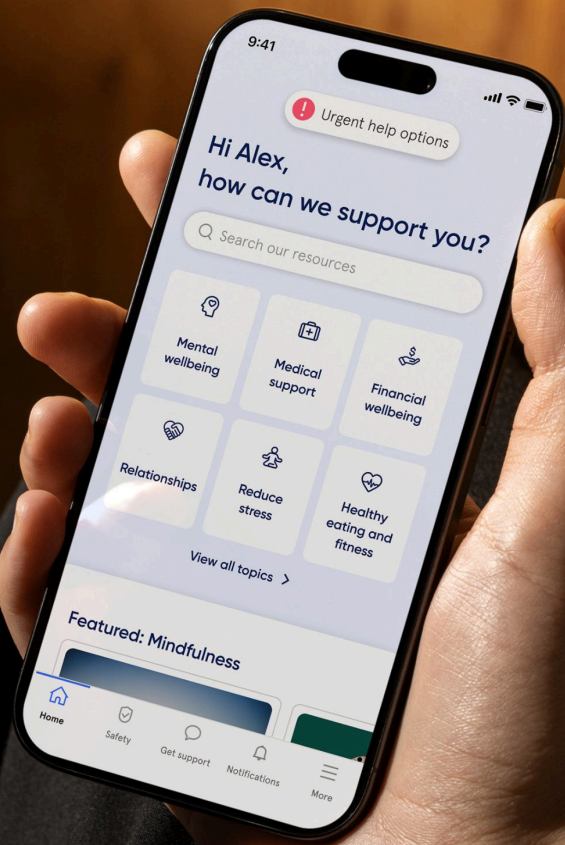
70%

of members report symptom improvement after interacting with Sonder



60%

of cases were resolved without the need for a hospital or GP visit



Protect your people. Protect your business

Sonder is a workforce health and safety platform that provides the right care at the right time for personal safety, medical, and mental health needs. The Sonder app offers 24/7 immediate connection to expert support via chat or call, personal safety tools like smart check-ins and journey tracking, and access to wellbeing resources such as personal assessments and self-care content.

Request a demo to find out how Sonder can help you reduce people related risks and costs, ensure compliance, and build a resilient, productive workforce.



[Request a demo](#)



Trusted by



Accreditations



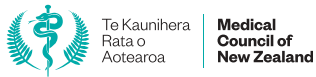
Australia



Australia



New Zealand



New Zealand



United Kingdom