

# Henry Ford Health care program improves outcomes, lowers costs for Medicare Advantage members with back and joint pain

*Two new studies found 80-90% improvement in health outcomes and \$9,000 per patient savings on average for Health Alliance Plan Medicare Advantage members*

DETROIT, MI, UNITED STATES, July 7, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- New research shows that a virtual musculoskeletal (MSK) care program developed by Henry Ford Health helps Medicare Advantage members improve their health while significantly reducing healthcare costs.

The program, offered through Health Alliance Plan by Henry Ford Health, connects members experiencing back, neck, hip, knee and shoulder pain with a multidisciplinary virtual care team through [Protera Health](#), a physician-led care model focused on nonsurgical treatment.

Two recently published studies found the program improved pain, physical function and mental health while reducing healthcare spending by more than 50%.

"I see many MSK patients who are not candidates for surgery but still need timely, effective care," said Dr. Eric Makhni, chief executive officer of Protera Health, an orthopedic surgeon at Henry Ford Health and co-author of the recent studies. "These findings show that when patients have access to coordinated care earlier, they experience meaningful improvements in pain, function and overall well-being while avoiding unnecessary procedures and costs."

Participants in the MSK care program receive personalized care plans that include virtual visits with physicians, physical therapists and health coaches. The program also provides guided exercise therapy, educational content, symptom monitoring, lifestyle support and care coordination to in-person services when needed. Another key benefit is rapid access, with specialist evaluation available within 24-48 hours. Early assessment allows patients to be triaged quickly to the right care plan, whether that means non-surgical treatment or referral to a surgeon for intervention.

A [study published in NEJM Catalyst](#) evaluated Health Alliance Plan Medicare Advantage members enrolled in the program and compared them with similar members receiving traditional musculoskeletal care.

Researchers found:

- Musculoskeletal-related costs decreased from \$347 to \$149 per member per month due to the Protera Health program.
- The program generated average annual savings of \$8,652 per member compared with traditional musculoskeletal care, net of program fees.
- Participants reported a 27% reduction in pain.
- 85% of participants achieved meaningful improvement in physical function or pain interference.
- Member satisfaction averaged 9.2 out of 10.

"When care is connected, coordinated and centered on the patient, costs come down and outcomes improve," said Dr. Charles Bloom, chief medical officer for Health Alliance Plan and a study co-author. "By bringing physicians, physical therapists and support teams together virtually, we can reduce unnecessary services and help patients get better at a lower cost."

As a non-profit health plan, Health Alliance Plan invests cost savings from programs like this one back into its member benefits and the communities it serves.

A [second study](#), published in *Frontiers in Digital Health*, examined outcomes among 308 Medicare Advantage members who participated in the 12-week virtual MSK program.

Researchers found:

- Clinically meaningful improvements in physical pain and mental health, based on validated National Institutes of Health outcome measures.
- Depression symptoms decreased by 36%.
- Anxiety symptoms decreased by 25%.
- Nearly 94% of participants experienced meaningful improvement in at least one health outcome.

Together, the studies demonstrate the potential for physician-led virtual care programs to improve outcomes for patients with musculoskeletal conditions while reducing healthcare spending, particularly when integrated into health plan delivery programs.

"This is a strong example of how Henry Ford Health advances high-value care through its integrated care delivery model," said Dr. Peter Watson, chief clinical success officer for

Populance, a Henry Ford Health subsidiary that specializes in care management and population health. Watson is also a co-author of both studies. "This model brings physicians, physical therapy, and care teams together to provide meaningful relief from musculoskeletal conditions through a coordinated episode of care. Our data show that engaging patients early in a multidisciplinary, physician-led approach improves outcomes, enhances the patient experience, and reduces unnecessary cost."

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