

Coping with Your Chronic Pain

Unlike acute pain, where pain only lasts a short time, chronic pain may last for years. Chronic pain often has many causes that can change over time. These causes can include:

- changes in the nervous system
- lifestyle factors such as smoking, lack of exercise, poor diet, or stress
- environmental factors

No matter what the cause is, chronic pain is real. It does not go away. It can lead to a loss of physical activity and sleep, a sense of uncertainty about the future, and feelings of helplessness. Learning to manage pain is important to your health and well being. In spite of the reason for your pain, you can change some aspects of the problems pain can cause by learning to manage it.

Key to Managing Chronic Pain

1. **Acknowledge your feelings** about pain and how it affects you. You may feel sad, angry, or anxious about how unfair your pain is and how it has upset your life. You should know that even though anger, blame, guilt, and sadness are normal feelings, they can be paralyzing. Share your feelings and frustrations with family, friends, and your health care team. Accept their support and seek out new ways to cope. Adopt a sense of ownership of your pain problem to regain control of your life.
2. **Adopt a healthy lifestyle.** Like many chronic illnesses, chronic pain is best managed with healthy habits. Eat healthy foods, stay active, get enough sleep, and drink plenty of water. Because day-to-day stress can make pain feel worse, learn ways to manage your stress. There are many skills and resources to choose from. Ask your health care team for a list of options.
3. **Set realistic goals** to improve the quality of your life. Even though we may not be able to “cure” your pain or take it away, setting and meeting goals can help you have less pain and improve the quality of your life.
4. **Take an active part** in your care. You are the most important member of your health care team. Professionals can help you control your pain by looking at it from other points of view and coming up with other options, but only you can make changes that meet your needs.

Use a “Multimodal” Approach

There are no simple and easy ways to manage chronic pain. But, this doesn't mean we give up. There are many options and ways to combine therapies to reduce your pain and take back control of your life. Each person needs a plan that includes both drug and non-drug methods. Just as pain is rarely controlled with non-drug methods alone, pain cannot be managed with drugs alone. It may take many trials to find the best approach for you.

Sleep

Sleep is needed for good health. You should plan to get at least 6 hours of sleep each night. During sleep, the body restores many of the hormones it needs to function. For most people, sleep, mood, and pain are closely linked. A goal of your pain treatment plan will be to improve your sleep through exercise and staying away from drugs and foods that can disrupt sleep.

Nutrition

How and what we eat affects how we feel and how our body handles sickness. Eat a balanced and varied diet. Lose weight if you need to, but avoid fad diets. Use small amounts of sugar, salt, and fat. Do not use caffeine or alcohol. Drink at least 8 glasses of water each day. For more ideas for healthy eating, or advice on how to improve your eating habits, ask to speak with one of our nutritionists.

Medications

You may be prescribed several medicines to help with pain, sleep, or other symptoms. Even though medicine can be an important part of your treatment plan, know that drugs alone are rarely the answer to chronic pain. Take them as prescribed. Store them in a secure, locked place. Do not take more than you are supposed to or add over-the-counter drugs or herbs without first talking to your doctor or nurse.

Professional Counseling

Psychological counseling and support is part of any treatment plan for people who have chronic pain. Counselors can help you learn how to cope with the stress, feeling alone, and the disruptions that pain can cause. Learning about your current coping skills and new ways to cope can help as much as any pain medicine.

Exercise

When you are in pain, you might want to limit your activities, but this can make the problem worse. Your physical therapist will work with you to plan a program you can carry out at home. Exercise 30 minutes a day 3-4 times a week. The goal is to increase strength, flexibility, and endurance so you can prevent further injury and be active in your daily life. When you begin an exercise program, you may find yourself in more pain at first because your body is out of shape, not because your chronic pain is worse. Maintain a program of exercise to sustain pain control.

Overexertion

When your pain level is lower, you may want to push yourself to catch up things that you have not been able to do. But, just like an athlete in training, you need to slowly build back to former activities. Learn to pace yourself doing the same amount each day. It may be helpful to keep a journal to see how active you are each day and to become aware of how your pain varies. Be sure to alternate rest and movement throughout the day.

Develop a Plan for Pain Flare-Ups

Talk to your doctor about the difference between a flare and pain that could call for further evaluation. Keep a written plan ready for when your chronic pain flares up. Remind yourself that pain flares happen and rarely call for more tests or doctors visits. Knowing that this is a flare is the first step. Make a list of things that might trigger a flare up for you. Your flare plan may include ways to pace or change your activity, skills to help you relax or distract yourself, how to use heat and cold to relieve your pain, or short term changes in your medicines. Ask for *Health Facts for You* #5761, Managing a Pain Flare for more ideas on dealing with pain flares.

Resources For People With Chronic Pain

American Pain Foundation
<http://www.painfoundation.org>
201 N Charles Street, Suite 710
Baltimore MD 21201-4111

The American Chronic Pain Association (ACPA)
<http://www.theacpa.org/>
E-Mail: ACPA@pacbell.net
The ACPA
PO Box 850
Rocklin, CA 95677
Phone: (916) 632-0922
Fax: (916) 632-3208

National Chronic Pain Outreach Association (NCPOA),
<http://neurosurgery.mgh.harvard.edu/ncpainoa.htm>
7979 Old Georgetown Road, Suite 100,
Bethesda, MD 20814-2429,
Phone 301-652-4948,
Fax 301-907-0745.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright ©8/2014. University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#5298.