

Halt The Hurt! Chronic Pain

Pain—it's something we've all experienced. From our first skinned knee to the headaches, back pain and creaky joints as we age, pain is something we encounter many times. Most pain is acute and goes away quickly. But in some cases, when pain develops slowly or persists for months or even years, then it's called chronic pain, and it can be tricky to treat.

Chronic pain is a huge problem. Over 115 million people nationwide—about 1 in 3 Americans—suffer from some kind of long-term pain. It's the leading reason that people miss work.

Defining & Diagnosing Chronic Pain

Chronic pain differs in many ways from acute pain. Acute pain is part of the body's response to an injury or short-term illness. Acute pain can help prevent more serious injury. For instance, it can make you quickly pull your finger away from a hot stove or keep your weight off a broken ankle. The causes of acute pain can usually be diagnosed and treated, and the pain eventually ends.

Chronic pain can come in many forms, and it accompanies several conditions including low-back pain, arthritis, cancer, migraine, fibromyalgia, endometriosis and inflammatory bowel disease. These persistent pains can severely limit your ability to move around and perform day-to-day tasks. Chronic pain can lead to depression and anxiety. It's hard to look on the bright side when pain just won't go away. Some experts say that chronic pain is a disease itself.

TIPS FOR PAIN RELIEF

- **Keep your weight in check.** Extra weight can slow healing and make some pain worse, especially in the back, knees, hips and feet.
- **Exercise.** Pain may make you inactive, which can lead to a cycle of more pain and loss of function. Ask your doctor if exercise might help.
- **Get enough sleep.** It will improve healing and your mood.
- **Avoid tobacco, caffeine and alcohol.** They can set back your treatment and increase pain.
- **Get the right medical help.** If your regular doctor hasn't found a helpful approach for pain relief, ask to see a pain specialist.
- **Join a pain support group.** Talk with others about how they deal with pain. Share your ideas and thoughts while learning from those in the group.

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ON NEXT PAGE**



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The Complexities Of Chronic Pain

The complexities of chronic pain can make it difficult to treat. Many of today's medications for chronic pain include aspirin, ibuprofen and COX-2 inhibitors. But if taken at high doses for a long time, these drugs can irritate your stomach and digestive system and possibly harm your kidneys. And they don't work for everyone.

As with all drugs, you have to find a balance between effectiveness and side effects. Moreover, researchers note that current available drug therapies don't provide all the answers. Many people find that medications don't fully relieve their chronic pain, and they can experience unpleasant side effects.

Treating Chronic Pain

Evidence on a number of fronts, for several conditions, suggests that mind and body approaches can be helpful additions to conventional medicine for managing chronic pain.

Research has shown that patients with chronic low-back pain might benefit from acupuncture, massage therapy, yoga or cognitive-behavioral therapy (a type of talk therapy).

Chronic pain usually cannot be cured. But treatments can help. They include medicines, acupuncture, electrical stimulation and surgery. Other treatments include psychotherapy, relaxation and meditation therapy, biofeedback, and behavior modification.

QUICK TIPS ON CHRONIC PAIN RELIEF

- As with any treatment, it is important to consider safety before using complementary health products and practices. If you are considering a complementary health practice to help manage your chronic pain, talk with your health care provider first.
- Reviews of research on acupuncture, massage, and spinal manipulation for chronic low-back pain have found evidence that these therapies may be beneficial.
- Some research has shown that acupuncture may help reduce pain and improve joint mobility, and a small number of studies on massage and tai chi for osteoarthritis symptoms suggest that both therapies may help to reduce pain and improve the ability to walk and move.
- There is some evidence that spinal manipulation may help patients suffering from chronic tension-type or neck-related headaches.
- In general, there is not enough scientific evidence to prove that any complementary health practices are effective for rheumatoid arthritis, and there are safety concerns about some practices.