

Self-managing chronic pain

Key Points

- Medicines alone are not the most effective way to treat chronic pain.
- Chronic pain may never be completely cured, but can be managed.
- People managing their pain on a daily basis get the best results.
- There are many self-management strategies that can help.

Why medicines alone are not the answer for chronic pain

Most of us experience pain from time to time, but for one in five Australians, it doesn't go away.¹ This is chronic pain and lasts beyond the expected time for healing after surgery or trauma, and can exist without any clear reason.

While medicines such as codeine or other opioids are sometimes prescribed for chronic pain, research has shown they are not effective in the longer term, contributing on average to only a 30 per cent reduction in pain.²

They can also come with unwanted side-effects such as nausea, drowsiness, constipation, mood change and difficulty in concentrating.³

After a short time you may develop a tolerance to opioids and the dosage must be progressively increased to achieve the same pain-relieving (analgesic) effect.

If you have chronic pain, it is important to learn to manage it effectively without relying on medicines.

Evidence shows that people with chronic pain who are actively involved in managing their pain on a daily basis have less disability than those who are engaged in passive therapies, such as taking medication or surgery.⁴

Tips on managing chronic pain without painkillers

Chronic pain is a complex experience, which is influenced by physical, psychological, and social factors. The best way to manage it is to address all the factors affecting your pain.⁵

Following are some tips to help you manage your pain. It is important to keep a positive attitude until you find a mix that works for you.

Daily stretching and walking

Moderate daily exercise will keep your muscles conditioned and improve your pain levels. If you haven't been active in a while, start small and increase your activity over time. Ask your physiotherapist about a tailored exercise program.

Pacing activities throughout the day

Pacing is key to pain management. By planning rest or stretch breaks, and keeping physical activity at an even level throughout the day, you can reduce the risk of flare-ups.

Daily relaxation techniques

When our muscles are tense, they increase pressure on nerves and tissues, which increases pain. To reduce muscle tension, you can use simple deep-breathing techniques, or take a yoga or meditation class, to learn techniques to use at home.

Practice mindfulness

Mindfulness is about learning to accept all your thoughts and feelings, including pain. It can help you live with pain more successfully.

Learn desensitisation

Desensitisation involves learning not to react to your pain in a negative way. This retrains the way your brain thinks about pain, which can improve the experience of pain and pain levels.

Apply distraction

Distraction is focusing on something other than the pain, often something pleasant or something you enjoy doing, such as listening to music.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

CBT is a psychological technique to help people deal with the factors associated with chronic pain, including depression. Your GP can refer you to a psychologist for help with CBT.

Improve sleep

A good night's rest will help you cope with your pain. If you are having problems sleeping, try implementing a bedtime ritual, and keep your bedroom peaceful and relaxing.

Diet and exercise

Maintaining a healthy weight can improve symptoms of chronic pain, particularly for people with osteoarthritis and other musculoskeletal or joint pain. Weight loss can be achieved by modifying your diet and reducing your daily intake of saturated fats and sugars. Daily low-impact exercise will also help. Your GP can help you develop a weight-loss plan.

Other treatments

Some people experience pain relief from massage or treatments that stimulate the nervous system. These include acupuncture or using a TENS (Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulator) machine. If your pain continues at a severe level, your GP may refer you to a pain specialist.

Finding support

Chronic pain can be an isolating experience and you may benefit from joining a support group or online community. You may also consult a counsellor if pain affects your work or home relationships.

How a GP Management Plan can help people with chronic pain

If you want to take charge of your pain management, find a supportive GP who can coordinate your care with a Medicare-funded care plan, which will allow you access to a rebate for treatment from an allied health professional, such as a physiotherapist or psychologist. Note that while Medicare provides a rebate for the preparation of a Chronic Disease Management Plan and a Team Care Arrangement, there may be a gap you are required to pay.⁶

For further information and support:

- n Painaustralia
www.painaustralia.org.au
- n Pain Management Network
www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au/chronic-pain
- n painHEALTH
www.painhealth.csse.uwa.edu.au
- n Australian Pain Management Network
www.painmanagement.org.au
- n Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)
www.drugs.health.gov.au
- n Ask Your Pharmacist
www.askyourpharmacist.com.au
- n Chronic Pain Australia
www.chronicpinaustralia.org.au
- n Pain Link Helpline 1300 340 357

References:

- 1) Blyth F et al. (2001) Chronic pain in Australia: a prevalence study. *Pain* 89(2-3): 127-34
- 2) Turk DC. Clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of treatments for patients with chronic pain. *Clin J Pain* 2002b; 18: 355-65
- 3) Nicholas N et al. (2011) *Manage Your Pain*
- 4) Cousins MJ & Gallagher RM (2011) *Fast Facts: Chronic and Cancer Pain*
- 5) Blyth, F.M. et al. (2005) Self-management of chronic pain: a population-based study. *Pain* 113: 285-292
- 6) Medicare provides a rebate for the preparation of a Chronic Disease Management Plan and a Team Care Arrangement. If the GP does not bulk bill these services there may be a gap payment you will be required to pay. Check with your GP. It is important you check with the provider to see how much the appointment will cost as you may have to pay the gap.

