

Wear Red for Pain

Community Pharmacy Guide

Supporting consumers living with chronic pain through meaningful conversations, medicines advice and person-centred care.



Photo courtesy of The Pharmacy Guild of Australia



painaustralia



The Pharmacy
Guild of Australia

1. Wear Red for Pain: Community Pharmacy can make a difference

“Community pharmacies are often the first place people go when they’re struggling... but many of us don’t feel comfortable explaining what our pain actually looks like, because it affects so much more of life than can be captured by talking about a number on a scale.”

– Amanda who lives with daily chronic pain from a back injury received in a workplace accident.

Wear Red for Pain is Painaustralia’s national awareness campaign held annually during September’s International Pain Awareness Month.

As the national peak body working to support and improve the quality of life of people living with chronic pain, Painaustralia brings together consumers, health professionals, researchers, government and industry to advocate for better pain prevention, treatment, education and care.

Through Wear Red for Pain, we aim to increase understanding of chronic pain, reduce stigma and encourage conversations with health professionals that help people feel heard, supported and connected to appropriate care.

Through the theme ‘My Pain is More Than a Number’, we are putting the important role of community pharmacists at the heart of the campaign. By having meaningful conversations about pain, pharmacists can help consumers feel heard, provide trusted medicines advice and support them to better manage their chronic pain.

Community pharmacists are among the most accessible healthcare professionals in Australia. Whether someone is experiencing pain for the first time, managing a flare-up, collecting a prescription or seeking advice about their medicines, pharmacists are one of the first healthcare professionals they turn to.

These everyday interactions provide valuable opportunities to improve a consumer’s understanding of their medicines, support safe medicine use, answer questions and, most importantly, feel heard.

Chronic or persistent pain, lasting longer than three months, affects **4.2 million Australians**.

While chronic pain can affect people of all ages and backgrounds, it disproportionately affects older Australians, with one in three people aged over 65 years living with chronic pain.

Women are also disproportionately affected, comprising just over half of all Australians living with chronic pain. Importantly, around 68% of people living with chronic pain are of working age, highlighting the significant impact chronic pain has on individuals, families, workplaces and the broader economy.



Photo courtesy of The Pharmacy Guild of Australia

1. Community Pharmacy can make a difference

Chronic pain is one of Australia's leading causes of disability and is associated with increased psychological distress, anxiety and depression, affecting sleep, work, relationships, social participation, independence and overall quality of life.

Many people living with chronic pain spend years navigating the healthcare system before receiving an accurate diagnosis or appropriate treatment. Waiting times to see a pain specialist can often extend to several years. During this time they often turn to their community pharmacist.

Consumers consistently tell us they value and trust their community pharmacist. Yet, for many, talking about chronic pain is not easy. Some have experienced feeling dismissed or misunderstood by healthcare professionals, family, friends or colleagues. Others worry about being judged, seen as complaining, or having their pain questioned because it isn't visible. As a result, many people choose not to talk about the full impact chronic pain has on their lives.

This presents an important opportunity for community pharmacists. By creating a welcoming, respectful and non-judgemental environment, you can help make conversations about chronic pain easier.

Importantly, people living with chronic pain don't expect community pharmacists to have all the answers. What they consistently tell us is that they want to be listened to, treated with respect and recognised as more than their pain or the medicines they take. Even a brief conversation can help someone feel supported, better informed and more confident in managing their pain.

This guide has been developed to provide practical insights from people living with chronic pain, together with evidence-informed information, conversation starters and practical tips to help community pharmacists better understand the lived experience of chronic pain and the important role they can play in supporting consumers.

Because pain is more than a number – and every conversation has the potential to make a difference.

“Numbering our pain on a scale does not account for the damage to our soul.”

– Mike a veteran living with chronic pain following injuries sustained during his service in the Australian Defence Force.



2. Understanding Chronic Pain

“A number doesn’t reflect how pain affects your sleep, your mood, your ability to work or your relationships. Reducing that to a single digit misses the much bigger picture of what someone is actually having to live through.”

– Amanda, living with chronic pain.

For many people living with chronic pain, the hardest part isn’t always the pain itself – it’s feeling that others, including healthcare professionals, don’t fully understand what they are experiencing.

While pharmacists are not expected to manage every aspect of chronic pain, the way they respond can have a lasting impact on whether someone feels heard, understood and confident to continue seeking care.

Chronic pain is now recognised as a complex chronic health condition that extends well beyond physical symptoms. Regardless of age or diagnosis, many people become skilled at masking their pain so they can continue working, care for their families or simply avoid unwanted attention. The absence of visible signs should never be mistaken for the absence of pain.

Many people living with chronic pain have experienced years of delayed diagnosis, stigma or feeling dismissed by healthcare professionals. Others have had their pain questioned because it isn’t visible or have felt judged because of the medicines they take.

As a result, they may arrive at the pharmacy feeling anxious, reluctant to ask questions or worried they won’t be believed.

Some simply want to collect their medicines and leave as quickly as possible, while others may be exhausted following a pain flare or worried they will be questioned critically rather than empathetically.

These experiences can make it difficult to start a conversation, even when support is needed. For many consumers, explaining what they are experiencing can be incredibly difficult, and assigning a number to their pain often fails to capture its true impact.

“When asked to define your pain, you’re often asked to provide a number out of 10 to rate the pain. It can be difficult, as providing a number doesn’t take into consideration everything pain is and what it does to a person...Pain has significant day-to-day and long-term impacts which can be physical, mental and emotional.”

– Megan, a new mother living with multiple health conditions that cause chronic pain.

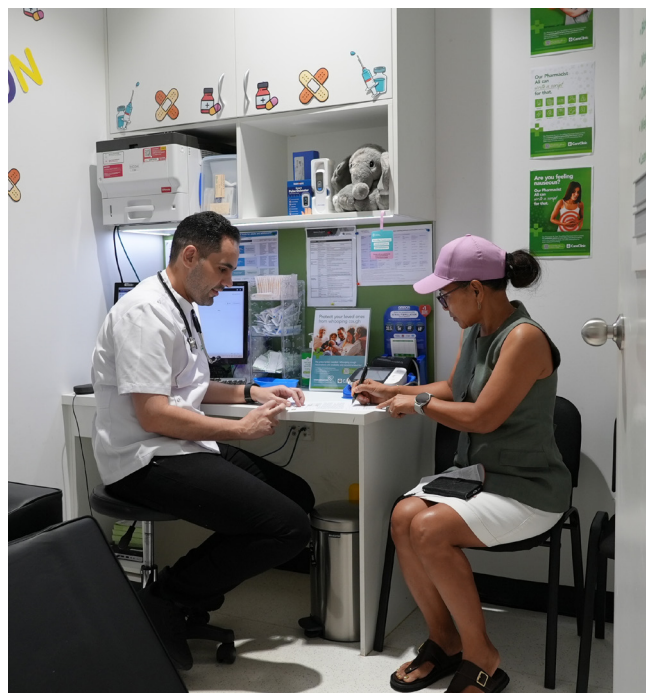


Photo courtesy of The Pharmacy Guild of Australia

Tabitha, a registered nurse living with thoracic outlet syndrome in regional Victoria, knows this experience well.

“My normal baseline level of pain sits at around a six on the conventional one to ten pain scale. This means that when I’m experiencing a flare-up, there are fewer numbers left to accurately describe how much more intense the pain is compared to my baseline.”

After more than five years of searching for answers, Tabitha’s condition was finally diagnosed, but not before permanent nerve damage had occurred. While regular ketamine infusions help manage her symptoms, they don’t reveal her daily challenges. Washing her hair, tying her shoes or carrying shopping are tasks many people do without thinking, yet each can trigger pain or require assistance from family or friends.

Her pain is largely invisible, but its impact is not.



Tabitha, a registered nurse living with thoracic outlet syndrome

“What would make it easier for me to have my pharmacist do is just maybe being able to have a bit more of a private conversation at times when I’m picking up my scripts and I’m getting my medications”

Constant pain has profoundly affected Tabitha’s mental health, her ability to socialise and participate in activities she once enjoyed, and ultimately her quality of life. Like many people living with chronic pain, she has also experienced feeling dismissed because she “didn’t look like someone in pain”.

Every person’s experience of chronic pain is different. Some live with constant pain, while others experience fluctuating symptoms or unpredictable flare-ups.

What works for one person may not work for another, which is why contemporary pain management recognises the importance of an individualised, person-centred approach. For many people, the goal is not simply to reduce pain, but to improve function, participate in everyday life and regain the activities that matter most to them.

Medicines may play an important role for some people, but they are rarely the whole answer. Effective pain management may also include movement, education, psychological support, self-management strategies and input from a range of healthcare professionals. Community pharmacists have an important role in supporting this broader approach through medicine safety, education, continuity of care and referral when appropriate.

Because community pharmacists often have regular contact with people living with chronic pain, they are uniquely placed to notice changes over time, reinforce the safe use of medicines, encourage questions and concerns, and help consumers access additional support when needed.

Understanding the person behind the pain is the foundation of person-centred care and one of the most valuable contributions a community pharmacist can make.

“Acknowledging the pain I’m in and believing me is probably the biggest thing. Even if you can’t solve the pain straight away, understanding how it impacts my life is really important.”

– Tabitha.

3. A Consumer's Insights

"My pain is more than just a number. A number cannot accurately reflect what my pain is, the various and debilitating side effects it causes me, and the ripple effect it has on my day-to-day life and on the lives of those around me."

– Megan.

For many people living with chronic pain, community pharmacists are among the healthcare professionals they see most often. Over time, these regular interactions can build trust, provide reassurance and create opportunities to support people beyond simply dispensing medicines.

Megan's experiences with pharmacists have been overwhelmingly positive, her story illustrates how empathy, clear communication and taking a genuine interest in the person – not just their prescription – can make a meaningful difference to someone living with persistent pain.

Megan's experience

A new mother living with polycystic ovarian syndrome, endometriosis, uterine fibroids, adenomyosis, Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS) and a heart condition resulting from chronic pain, Megan has had years of living with 'an intimate understanding of pain'.

Now 36, with a baby daughter, she has long since tried 'almost every single pain medication that is available' in a pharmacy, including every opioid.

"The biggest thing that contributes to the stigma is that people can't see your pain. You don't walk around with a cast on your arm. You're not in a wheelchair, or on crutches, but every day can still mean debilitating pain. Even patients collecting their medication 'look' fine – textbook normal – but on the inside they could be exhausted and the only thing they've done that day is just get to the pharmacy to get their script filled."

Empathy and understanding are a winning combination for Megan. 'Taking the time to explain current medications, how to use them, feeling comfortable using them, are all beneficial check-ins,' she says. Also, understanding how chronic pain impacts family, work, and life beyond physical symptoms, asking if the consumer has support around them or if they are 'managing OK' goes a long way.

Conversations can be very important, Megan stresses. Asking questions, building a rapport and getting to understand patients as individuals, each with their unique pain journey is vital. No, it is not always easy, especially with a consumer who's in pain, hasn't slept well and who may present as cranky or rude. But an empathetic attitude, especially with regular patients, is the key, according to Megan.



Megan, a new mother living with a complex set of reproductive health conditions that cause chronic pain.

"For someone who is really struggling or experiencing information overload, just having a really bad pain day or someone who doesn't have a strong support system, having a pharmacist take the time to ask those simple questions could really help them..."

Not all GPs or pain specialists take the time to explain new medications. 'So, the pharmacist has that little bridging role, or opportunity, to just make sure the consumer understands.'

Touching base, double-checking and reassuring patients on strong medications that it is, for instance, OK to simultaneously take over-the-counter pain relief, can be positive and reassuring to a person in pain, says Megan. Even being able to email questions to a pharmacist can be helpful.

"Chronic pain impacts every part of your life and impacts those people around you as well – your loved ones, your friends, your co-workers – often unintentionally. It also comes with a lot of guilt and a lot of shame."

Medicines are just one of the tools in her pain toolkit.

'It's not the only thing I rely on, which is something for pharmacists to understand,' says Megan who remains upset she was once accused of 'doctor shopping' by two different pharmacists. This was after her then-pain specialist prescribed methadone for her pain, which she hadn't had time to question, and she presented at an unfamiliar pharmacy afterwards because it was conveniently close to the doctor and that pharmacy then directed her to a nearby pharmacy, which also refused to dispense.

4. Conversations That Can Make a Difference

“Knowing that the pharmacist has an understanding of chronic pain would encourage me to have a conversation. Having resources available in the pharmacy that I could ask about or take away with me would also be helpful.”

– Megan

Consumers consistently tell Painaustralia that one of the most valuable things a pharmacist can do is take the time to listen and ask supportive questions.

Many people living with chronic pain don't expect pharmacists – or any healthcare professional – to simply “fix” their pain. Many have spent years seeking a diagnosis, trying different treatments and living with the daily impact of chronic pain.

What they do want is to feel believed, respected, supported and guided. Those simple but meaningful interactions can help build confidence, encourage self-management and make a real difference to their quality of life, independence, and ability to participate in work, family and everyday life.

Some consumers don't necessarily think of pharmacists as someone they can talk to about living with chronic pain or seek advice and practical support from. As a result, valuable opportunities for conversations may be missed.

Mike, a veteran living with chronic pain following injuries sustained during his military service, reflects:

“I sadly cannot remember a specific question because most of the time I was heavily sedated on pain medicines and was focused on getting in and out of the pharmacy as quickly as possible. I do remember two pharmacists who took the time to ask about my situation. Those conversations were brief, but for a few moments I didn't feel entirely like a ghost.”

Mike's experience highlights that opportunities for meaningful conversations may be unintentionally missed—not because consumers don't want support, but because they may not realise their pharmacist can help or may feel uncomfortable starting the conversation themselves.

Consumers who have had positive experiences consistently describe these interactions as those where pharmacists actively listened without judgement, acknowledged the person's lived experience, and valued their understanding of how pain affected their daily life and what did or didn't work for them.

Rather than focusing solely on pain intensity, conversations that explore how pain is affecting a person's daily life provide a far more meaningful understanding of their needs.



Mike, a veteran living with chronic pain

Conversation starters

Consumers consistently say the most valuable conversations aren't necessarily the longest or most complex. Often, it is a simple question, genuine curiosity or a community pharmacist taking the time to explain about their medicines that helped them feel acknowledged, respected and supported.

Many consumers welcome a health professional taking the initiative to start these conversations.

"Generally, I would find it hard to start a conversation, but if the pharmacist initiated the conversation, I would be happy to speak to them."

– Megan, living with chronic pain

Consumers say questions that help them include:

- How is your pain affecting your day-to-day life?
- How are you coping at the moment?
- What has helped you manage your pain in the past?
- What concerns do you have about your medicines?
- Is there anything making it harder to manage your pain at the moment?

Conversations that build trust

Amanda has built a trusted relationship with her local pharmacist in Canberra, Con.

She says that when she walks into the pharmacy and tells him she is having a difficult day, the first question he asks is:

"What can I do to help?"

Over time, Con has taken the opportunity to get to know Amanda, explain her medicines, answer her questions and prepare her for potential side effects.

That relationship has made it easier for Amanda to seek advice when she needs it and has given her confidence that she will be listened to and supported.

Amanda believes this highlights one of the greatest opportunities community pharmacists have.

"He's invested the time to stand with me over the years and have conversations – what does this feel like, what are you hoping to get from this medicine, do you understand the possible side effects? It's actually about having the conversation."

She also encourages consumers to think differently about the role of their pharmacist.

"One of the missed opportunities for people living with a long-term health condition is that you can actually make an appointment with your pharmacist. Building a relationship based on trust and support means that when you're really struggling, they already know you and how they can help."



Amanda, living with chronic pain

Supporting Safe Medicine Use

One of the most important conversations community pharmacists can have with people living with chronic pain is about the safe and effective use of medicines.

Even consumers who have regular appointments with their GP, pain specialist or other members of their healthcare team often have questions between visits.

They may be unsure:

- how to take medicines safely,
- whether medicines can be taken together, or with vitamins or complementary medicines,
- how to manage side effects, or,
- how to store them safely at home.

Many people living with chronic pain also take medicines for other chronic health conditions, increasing the potential for medicine interactions and making regular medicines reviews even more important.

As the medicines experts within the healthcare team, pharmacists are ideally placed to answer these questions, reinforce safe medicine use, identify potential medicine-related problems and encourage appropriate review when medicines are no longer providing benefit or causing unwanted effects.

These conversations also provide an opportunity to discuss realistic expectations of medicines. They reinforce that medicines are only one part of effective pain management and encourage consumers to explore other strategies that may improve function and quality of life.

Importantly, pharmacists can help consumers feel more confident in managing their medicines by providing practical advice on:

- medicine safety,
- safe storage in the home,
- disposal of unused or expired medicines,
- when to seek further advice from their healthcare team.

“Sometimes I feel anxious before visiting a pharmacy because I worry I’ll be judged for relying on pain medicines. There have been times when questions about my medicines felt interrogative rather than supportive.”

– Amie, living with fibromyalgia



Amie, living with fibromyalgia

Experiences like Amie’s can make consumers reluctant to ask questions or discuss concerns, even when they need advice. Creating a welcoming, respectful and non-judgemental environment can help reduce anxiety and encourage consumers to seek advice and ask questions they may otherwise keep to themselves.

Consumers consistently value pharmacists who work collaboratively with them, acknowledge their lived experience, ask what has and hasn’t worked previously, and take concerns about medicines seriously.

“Being asked whether I understand my medicines and their side effects is helpful because it gives me the opportunity to ask questions and educate myself. Being asked how I manage my pain makes the interaction more than transactional and helps build a rapport with my pharmacist.”

– Megan

Resources for consumers

- [Painaustralia: National Pain Services Directory](#)
- [Faculty of Pain Medicine \(ANZCA\) patient resources](#)
- [Online Pain Education Network tools and resources](#)
- [NSW Agency for Clinical Innovation Pain Management Network](#)

5. Join Wear Red for Pain

Please help us make chronic pain visible

During the week of 1 September, Painaustralia invites community pharmacies across Australia to Wear Red for Pain and help make pain visible.

By taking part, your pharmacy can help raise awareness of chronic pain, reduce stigma and start meaningful conversations that help consumers feel seen, heard and supported.

Register your pharmacy

Register your pharmacy to access campaign resources, receive campaign updates and help us showcase the national impact of Wear Red for Pain.

Scan the QR code or visit pinaustralia.org.au/wearredforpain:

By registering, your pharmacy will:

- Be recognised as an official Wear Red for Pain participant.
- Receive campaign updates and reminders.
- Access downloadable campaign resources.



Scan the QR Code to visit pinaustralia.org.au/wearredforpain

How your pharmacy can get involved

Getting involved is simple.

In the week of 1 September, your pharmacy can:

- Wear red to show your support.
- Display campaign posters and counter cards.
- Start conversations with consumers about chronic pain.
- Share trusted information and resources with consumers.
- Promote the campaign across your pharmacy's social media channels.

Every conversation has the potential to help someone feel understood, supported and connected to the care they need.

Share your support and go in the draw to win

We'd love to see how your pharmacy supports Wear Red for Pain.

Upload a photo of your team, display or in-store activities via the QR code and you'll go into the draw to win one of two \$250 gift cards for your pharmacy.

Selected entries may also be featured across Painaustralia's:

- Website
- Social media channels
- Campaign communications
- Campaign reporting

Campaign Resource Hub

Visit our [Wear Red for Pain campaign page](#) to access a range of free resources, including:

Pharmacy resources

- Community Pharmacy Guide
- Campaign posters
- Counter cards
- Consumer factsheet

Digital resources

- Social media tiles and digital assets

Together, we can make a difference

Community pharmacists play a vital role in supporting Australians living with chronic pain.

By participating in Wear Red for Pain, your pharmacy can help increase awareness and reduce stigma.

Throughout this guide, you've heard directly from Australians living with chronic pain. Their experiences remind us that while medicines are an important part of care, they are only one part of the journey. Sometimes, the greatest difference begins with a simple conversation, a willingness to listen and helping someone feel seen and understood.

Wear Red for Pain this September.



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