Managing Chronic Pain

5 Helpful Answers to Common Questions
12 Sensible Life Hacks, and More
#1: HOW CAN I DEAL WITH CHRONIC PAIN?

Recognizing that chronic pain is a problem is the first step in finding treatment, so talk with your doctor or a pain management specialist about your symptoms. Together you can identify the source of the pain and come up with a comprehensive treatment plan.

Over-the-counter and prescription medications are often used to manage chronic pain. They may be combined with physical therapy, exercise, acupuncture, relaxation techniques, and psychological counseling.

(Source: Healthline.com)

1 in 6 Americans experiences chronic pain

#2: HOW DOES CHRONIC PAIN AFFECT THE BRAIN?

Pain is processed in the brain. As a result, aches from an injury or surgery can linger long after the body has healed. The sensations from short-term pain signal the actual injury. Long-term chronic pain exists independently.

Recent research also shows that chronic pain can play a significant role in stifling motivation.

For more on how the brain processes pain, see section 3, “The Latest Research on Chronic Pain Treatment.”

(Sources: Healthline.com; Stanford Medicine [med.stanford.edu])
#3: CAN ANXIETY, STRESS, OR DEPRESSION CAUSE CHRONIC PAIN?

These factors are not the sole causes of chronic pain. But, they can make chronic pain more likely or exacerbate existing patterns by lowering your pain tolerance.

Dealing with debilitating aches each day can lead to frustration, resentment, and stress. People with chronic pain are more likely to develop mood or anxiety disorders.

(Source: Healthline.com)

People who have depression are three times as likely to develop chronic pain as those who don’t.

#4: WHAT DOES A PAIN MANAGEMENT DOCTOR DO?

A pain management doctor treats any areas of your health affected by your pain issues. They’re trained to develop a customized plan to address and reduce your chronic pain.

A qualified pain management doctor has completed a fellowship program and is board-certified in pain management.

(Source: American Society of Regional Anesthesia and Pain Medicine [www.asra.com])

#5: IS CHRONIC PAIN CONSIDERED A DISABILITY?

In the United States, the Social Security Administration judges disability cases on the basis of whether a person has a severe, “medically determinable” physical or mental impairment.

This means that your chronic pain will not qualify you for disability benefits based on symptoms alone. Rather, your impairment needs to be supported by medical evidence in the form of lab tests, X-rays, and/or the results of a physical exam.

(Source: Disabilitysecrets.com)
Many people who live with chronic pain complement conventional treatments with so-called life hacks. These are creative, sometimes even unusual strategies that help make dealing with daily pain easier.

Together with members of our Facebook communities, we’ve developed a list of some of the most helpful chronic pain management life hacks out there. Consider these alternatives and see which ones you have the most success with.

“I sleep with an electric blanket. The heat helps soothe my joints enough to help me fall asleep. And if I wake up achy in the middle of the night, I can just turn the blanket back on, and it usually lulls me back to sleep.”
- Nicole, Living with Rheumatoid Arthritis community member

“I use a hair dryer to get warm air flowing across my shoulders and to loosen them up.”
- Debra, Living with Rheumatoid Arthritis community member

“Ice is my favorite pain management buddy. I place it on the worst areas for two hours at a time a few times a day. It helps with the inflammation very much. I also use Doc Teals lavender Epsom salts.”
- Dee Dee, Living with Rheumatoid Arthritis community member

“I put Thermacare stick-on heating pads on my knees before I sleep.”
- Jennifer, Living with Rheumatoid Arthritis community member
“I use **medical marijuana** for pain, particularly Indica strains high in THC and CBD.”
- Lindsay, **Living with Crohn’s Disease** community member

“I first try **deep breathing**, then a **healing bath**: apple cider vinegar and lavender essential oil in water as hot as I can stand for ten minutes.”
- Kathleen, **Living with Crohn’s Disease** community member

“I use **coclurcumin** and **fish oil supplements**, and I avoid eating **inflammatory foods**.”
- Emily, **Living with Crohn’s Disease** community member

“When nothing else helps with the pain, I pull up my favorite **music** playlist and put on my **headphones**. Works every time.”
- Anna, **Living with Rheumatoid Arthritis** community member
Effective pain treatments begin with an understanding of pain.

Treating pain has traditionally relied on opioid painkillers, surgeries, and injectables. But, new approaches are centered on how the brain processes pain.

Dr. Daniel Clauw, director of the Chronic Pain and Fatigue Research Center at the University of Michigan, says advancements such as brain imaging have ushered in a “new era of neuroscience.”

“One of the biggest changes in the field of pain research is the recognition that a lot of pain is coming not from a certain point in the body, but from the brain,” he tells Healthline. “The implications of this are huge.”

New approaches include using existing pharmaceuticals, such as antidepressants. These medications affect neurotransmitters related to pain processing centers in the brain.

One of the latest breakthroughs in chronic pain treatment comes out of Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. Researchers there have discovered inflammation-related proteins in the pain centers of the brain. Besides finding new avenues for treatment, the discovery offers an objective way to measure chronic pain.

Researchers at Northwestern University in Illinois say that chronic pain acts like an addiction to rewire the part of the brain that determines if you’re happy or sad. They’re currently pursuing a clinical trial to determine if pairing a Parkinson’s drug with anti-inflammatory medicine can effectively raise dopamine levels and reduce pain.

“We’re realizing more and more that you can’t see pain on an X-ray,” Clauw says. “The only organ you need to have pain is the brain.”

Works Cited


Pain is the body’s way of letting you know that something is wrong. Pain can appear suddenly or build slowly over time, ranging from mild and intermittent to severe and persistent. The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) indicates that acute pain, left untreated, can lead to chronic pain. According to Drs. Angela Koestler and Ann Myers, authors of *Understanding Chronic Pain*, chronic pain disables more people than cancer or heart disease.

**IS IT ACUTE OR CHRONIC PAIN?**

Identifying which type of pain you have is the first step in taking control:

- **Acute pain** comes on suddenly. It can be brief or last for weeks or months. Acute pain goes away once the cause has been treated.

- **Chronic pain** is ongoing. It may result from an injury or infection or be psychogenic, meaning it’s unrelated to injury. Chronic pain persists for months or years and affects your physical and emotional well-being.

**1. STAY HYDRATED**

According to the Mayo Clinic, dehydration may aggravate the symptoms of some chronic conditions, like headaches and back pain. Although it may be tempting to load up on coffee, soda, or juice, their diuretic effect makes them poor sources for hydration. Water keeps you hydrated without the extra calories, sodium, or caffeine.

**2. FOODS TO EAT**

An easy-to-digest diet free from processed foods can alleviate inflammation, according to studies published in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. Foods that may alleviate inflammation that leads to pain include leafy greens, foods high in omega-3 fatty acids, asparagus, low-sugar fruits (cherries, cranberries, plums, pineapple), and soy products.
3. FOODS TO LIMIT

Inflammation is a common cause of pain, and certain chemicals in foods may exacerbate it. Stay away from these possible inflammation instigators:

- nightshade vegetables (tomatoes, eggplant)
- dairy
- chocolate
- eggs
- citrus fruits
- high-fat red meat
- wheat products
- processed foods
- red wine, coffee, tea, and soda

4. TURN TO TURMERIC

Known for its anti-inflammatory properties, this brightly colored spice is a beneficial treatment for many health conditions, including chronic pain. Turmeric contains curcumin, which provides a natural way to reduce inflammation in the body, without harming the liver or kidneys. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine explains that turmeric increases ligament flexibility and boosts the immune system. Add turmeric to meals, or sprinkle it in your tea.

5. YOGA AND MEDITATION

Yoga promotes both strength and flexibility while calming the mind and decreasing stress. This centuries-old practice offers a method of stress reduction that can help those suffering from chronic pain, reports the Mayo Clinic.

Asana, the physical postures of yoga, breathwork, and meditation, are all tools in the pain-reduction kit. Stress causes muscles to spasm, according to the National Institutes of Health. Because muscle spasms are a part of acute and chronic pain, practicing asana trains your body to relax.
6. POSTURE PERFECT

Don’t always have time for the mat? There are simple ways to bring the posture of yoga into your life. Whether in front of the TV or using your computer at work, maintaining correct posture is essential in fighting pain.

Many of us fall prey to the C-slump (a rounded back, and head in front of the spine) which can impair nerve and blood flow, according to findings published in the Journal of Neuroscience. Keep your head directly above a tall, straight spine to prevent strain on your back and neck muscles.

7. TALK ABOUT YOUR PAIN

Talking about your pain may help reduce its effects. The American Psychological Association speaks to the benefits of psychotherapy—talk therapy—for chronic pain. Commonly utilized methods include cognitive behavioral therapy, biofeedback, and guided imagery.

These techniques teach stress management and real-life coping skills. The goal for patients is to improve their quality of life by getting better sleep, and reducing stress. Psychotherapy alone may not eliminate your chronic pain, but it can be effective in managing it.

MORE WAYS TO MANAGE YOUR PAIN

When diet and lifestyle changes aren’t enough, you may need to seek additional methods to treat your pain. Always check with your doctor to decide which alternatives are best for you. Additional methods to treat chronic pain include nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs, such as aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen), acetaminophen (Tylenol), localized anesthetic, physical therapy, hypnosis, or surgery.
FURTHER READING AND OTHER RESOURCES

Chronic Pain Treatment Options (Healthline.com)

For Pain Patients, the Physical and Emotional Are Intertwined (Healthline.com)

Study Reveals Brain Mechanism Behind Chronic Pain’s Sapping of Motivation (Stanford Medicine)

13 Rheumatoid Arthritis Life Hacks (Healthline.com)

6 Everyday Multiple Sclerosis Life Hacks (Healthline.com)

Best Buy Drugs: Using Opioids to Treat Chronic Pain (Consumer Reports Health)

Opioid (Opiates) Abuse and Addiction (Healthline.com)

American Chronic Pain Association

Mount Sinai Hospital Pain Management FAQ

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke