

Pain Management

Pain's Purpose

Aristotle called pain the "passion of the soul." While our notions of pain may not be quite as romantic as Aristotle's, it is important for us to recognize the constructive functions of pain. Pain is the body's mechanism of self-preservation. It tells you when your finger is touching a hot pan or when a fall has resulted in an injury that requires your attention. In this way, pain acts as a warning sign to alert you when damage to your body is occurring or may occur. In fact, the inability to experience pain is a dangerous condition because injury can occur and go unnoticed. For example, one common complication of diabetes is the loss of sensation in the feet. Because of this, people living with diabetes are cautioned to check their feet daily so that injuries are not missed. Because they lack a pain sensation, diabetics might miss being alerted to an injury.

Pain is generally divided into two main types: acute and chronic.

- Acute pain is the result of tissue damage and is generally short-lived. The pain gradually disappears through the course of normal healing. Acute pain has an identifiable cause and purpose. Due to the short-term nature of acute pain, persistent psychological reactions rarely result.
- Chronic pain by definition is pain that persists for more than six months. Some people with chronic pain conditions have symptoms for months or even years. Chronic pain may be the result of a specific injury (such as an injury to your back or knee) or an ongoing chronic medical problem (like arthritis, cancer, or shingles). Chronic pain may also occur for no apparent cause, baffling patients and doctors alike. It can hurt all the time or occur on and off. Chronic pain often limits everyday functioning and may lead to additional stressors such as sleep problems, medication side effects, reduced capacity for performing work, financial hardship, and strain on significant relationships. As such, the experience of chronic pain and its accompanying stressors may create feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and helplessness--greatly affecting a person's quality of life.

Facts on Chronic Pain:

- Approximately 80 million people in the United States suffer chronic pain
- Chronic low back pain affects nearly 31 million Americans and represents the most common cause of disability in persons less than 45 years of age
- Chronic pain consumes approximately \$70 billion per year

In addition to the human suffering that is caused by pain, the above statistics show the staggering financial costs that result due to lost income, lost productivity, and healthcare expenses.

What is Pain Management?

The most important issue in pain management is a focus on managing pain symptoms as opposed to looking for a quick fix. Pain management generally encompasses a variety of techniques to be used in combination over time. This multi-modal approach generally includes pharmacological interventions and lifestyle changes (e.g. diet, exercise, stress management) for optimal management of symptoms. To manage your condition, it is useful to think of chronic pain as a chronic disease. Much like heart disease or diabetes,

chronic pain may require a long-term treatment approach encompassing medication use in conjunction with behavioral changes to keep your pain symptoms in check.

At least 40 million Americans suffer chronic, recurring headaches

A total of \$4 billion a year is spent on headache medication yearly

Migraine sufferers lose 65 million workdays each year

The first step toward developing a pain management program is to find a knowledgeable physician to assist you with your medication and treatment decisions. Working with your doctor, you play an active role in your pain management program. Your careful documentation of all your diagnostic tests will assist your doctor in making appropriate treatment recommendations and referrals. Likewise, a medication diary in which you document medications used, dosages, side effects, and degree of pain relief provided will provide a useful record of successful and unsuccessful treatment regimens.

While your doctor can assist with the medical management of your pain, it is up to you to take charge of the behavioral interventions that are part of your pain management program. Simply put, you are the one who must take the steps to practice the appropriate lifestyle behaviors that are part of your overall program. Following a healthy diet, practicing relaxation and stress management techniques, and exercising on a regular basis are common recommendations in pain management programs. Becoming well-informed about these and other pain management strategies is a crucial step toward taking control of your chronic pain condition.

Following are various strategies that you may consider when devising your personal pain management program. Remember that your experience of pain is as unique as you are, so what works great for one person may not be so helpful to another. Be prepared to try a number of strategies of which maybe a handful will eventually prove useful to you for incorporating in your pain management program. Do talk over your plans with your doctor, and then get started on taking greater control of your pain.

Facts on Low-Back Pain

- Five million Americans are partially disabled by back problems and another 2 million are so severely disabled that they cannot go to work
- Low-back pain accounts for 93 million lost workdays
- More than \$5 billion are spent on health care costs due to low back pain each year

Strategies for Coping with Chronic Pain

Relaxation

Chronic pain is both physically and emotionally stressful, and this physical and mental tension can, in turn, make the pain worse. Planned, purposeful relaxation can help break the pain-stress cycle by lowering heart rate and blood pressure, relaxing tense muscles, reducing anxiety, and giving you a sense of control and well-being. The type of relaxation referred to here is different from the way we commonly think of as relaxing when we take time to read a book or watch TV. While these activities can be pleasurable and may play an important role in reducing your daily stress, the relaxation referred to here involves learning ways to calm your body and mind.

Tips for Relaxing

- Find a quiet place free of surrounding distractions. Darken the room. Take the phone off the hook. Dedicate this as time to yourself to not be interrupted. Playing a tape of soothing music or nature sounds may be helpful although some relaxation therapists suggest no background music.
- Sit comfortably. Sit in a comfortable position on a chair or the floor.
- Practice relaxation for at least 10 minutes. Deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, meditation, or other relaxation methods should be practiced for a minimum of 10-20 minutes on a daily basis (see descriptions below).

Search through the health section in your local library or bookstore to learn more about strategies for relaxation. You'll also want to explore relaxation tapes & CDs. Some offer soothing sounds and music while others provide instructions for you to follow along during your session.

| Deep breathing | Progressive Muscle Relaxation |
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| <p>In a relaxed position, take a slow, deep breath, and slowly release your breath. You may want to count to five for your inhale and five for you exhale to establish a slow rhythm of breathing.</p> <p>Feel your stomach expanding and releasing with each long inhale and exhale.</p> <p>Continue breathing in and out, focusing exclusively on the sounds and experience of your breathing.</p> <p>While deep breathing is a great lead in to a 10-20 minute relaxation session (minimum recommended length), deep breathing is also a great technique to use for a quick one minute relaxation break at various period during the day.</p> | <p>Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is an easy and effective technique for relaxing your body and mind. PMR involves deliberately tensing specific muscle groups for a short period of time and then releasing the tension.</p> <p>Start by tightening one group of muscles (e.g. lower arm) and hold the tension for 8 seconds. Then quickly release your tension, letting all the pain and tension flow out as you exhale.</p> <p>Repeat the tension-relaxation cycle with the same muscles then proceed to other muscle groups.</p> <p>With each release, focus on feeling your muscles relax and become loose and limp.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Guided Imagery</p> <p>Use your imagination to take you to a calm, peaceful place. Take a walk through a country lane, around a mountain lake, or along a pristine beach. Hear the soothing sounds of nature—the sounds of the birds, the rustle of the leaves on the trees. Feel the gentle breeze on your face. This is what guided imagery is all about, and the results can be wonderful. Your local library or bookstore has tables that can assist you with this technique</p> | |

Exercise

Exercise is an important component to your pain management program. Regular exercise improves your flexibility, your aerobic conditioning, and your muscle strength. It can also serve to boost your self-confidence and lessen anxiety and depression. Improving your overall fitness helps to keep you healthy and reduces your risk for further injuries while also helping to control your pain

Tips for Starting an Exercise Program

- Consult with your doctor. Be sure to discuss with your doctor what an appropriate level of physical activity is for you.
- Start slowly. Whenever beginning a new exercise program, start with just a few exercises and slowly add on more.
- Listen to your body. Be sure to listen to your body while you exercise and afterwards, as well. If you begin to have too much pain, stop doing the exercise.
- Learn to recognize the appropriate level of exercise for you. Discuss your exercises and symptoms with your doctor or physical therapist to learn the difference between normal discomfort and too much pain through exercise.

Heat and Cold Treatments

Heat and Cold treatments are effective for alleviating pain and stiffness due to arthritis. The heat treatments help to relax muscles and can be applied through moist heat (e.g. bath or hydro collar pack) or dry heat methods (heating pad or heat lamp). Cold treatments work by numbing the sore area and reducing inflammation, and are especially good for severe joint pain and swelling.

Arthritis Pain

Arthritis pain affects 20 million Americans

Arthritis consumes more than \$4 billion each year due to lost wages, decreased productivity and healthcare costs

Tips for Heat & Cold Treatments

- Use for the appropriate time limit. Heat and cold treatments should be used only 15-20 minutes at a time.
- Avoid extreme temperatures. Take care to assure that your treatment is not too hot or too cold, and do not use treatments if your skin has open sores or cuts.
- Protect your skin. When using packs, always place a towel between the pack and your skin for protection. After each treatment, check the area and allow your skin to return to room temperature before using another treatment.
- Follow the advice of your professionals. As always, follow the advice of your doctor or physical therapist concerning the use of these treatments.

| Heat Treatments | Cold Treatments |
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| Heat treatments help to relax muscles and promote circulation: | Cold treatments work by numbing the sore area and reducing inflammation: |
| Soak in a warm tub, shower, or whirlpool. | Place a cold pack or ice bag on the painful area. |
| Use an electric blanket or mattress pad (turning the heat up in the morning will help with morning stiffness). | If you do not have a cold pack, a bag of frozen peas works just as well. |
| Use a heating pad or hot packs on the painful site. | Do not use cold packs if you have poor circulation or vasculitis |
| Flannel pajamas and sheets will keep body warmer. | |

Managing Your Stress

Stress and fatigue increase pain, so stress management is an important component of pain management. While this includes relaxation strategies such as those discussed above, a complete stress management program involves more than relaxation. Stress management means looking at your schedule, planning your day, and setting your priorities. It means scheduling "appointments" with yourself for taking care of you. Getting a good night's sleep is also important for restoring your energy and spirits. Looking carefully at the activities you schedule for yourself and learning to say "no" to some requests for your time is important to do so you do not overload yourself.

Conclusion

Seek information. Becoming well-informed about your condition and about effective pain management strategies is one of the best things you can do for yourself. Remember that rarely does only one type of treatment or technique meet all your needs--rather, incorporating multiple treatment strategies to form a comprehensive pain management program is essential for producing optimal results for pain management.

Explore options. Listed above are only some of the treatment options available to you. In some cases, surgery may be an option to alleviate pain. In other cases, pain clinics may assist in providing effective strategies for pain management. Personal counseling may also be helpful to you in dealing with the emotional burden and physical limitations that a chronic pain condition can cause. Hypnosis has been helpful for providing relief to some by teaching a deep relaxation response. Be aware that the options are plentiful and deserve your investigation to see what works best for you. When you incorporate various techniques into your daily lifestyle, you will not only work toward alleviating your pain but you will also work toward becoming a healthier, more peaceful you.

References

An NIH news release about chronic pain therapy www.nih.gov/news/pr/nov99/ninds-18.htm

University of Washington Orthopaedics and Sports Medicine <http://www.orthop.washington.edu/>