



Coping with Chronic Pain: Frequently Asked Questions

What is chronic pain? Chronic pain is defined as pain that has lasted 3 months or more. There is often no ‘cure’ for the underlying cause of the pain. However, there are many highly effective interventions that can help reduce the symptom of the pain, including mind-body techniques like relaxation breathing, gentle movement, and imagery/meditation.

What causes chronic pain? People living with chronic pain may have different diagnoses, such as auto-immune disorders (e.g., fibromyalgia, lupus), herniated disc disease, and diabetic neuropathy, among others. Chronic pain may occur for a range of reasons; from an accident or injury, an illness, or develop without a known cause. **However, regardless of your diagnosis, increased muscle tension will make your pain worse.** You can experience this yourself by intentionally tensing up or clenching your muscles in an area where you experience pain and notice that the pain feels worse. This is just for a few seconds, imagine the impact of holding that tension for hours, which is what we often do without realizing it.

How can I manage my pain? Given that increased muscle tension increases pain, learning to relax and reduce muscle tension will relieve the pain. This is not a ‘cure’ for the cause of the pain but will take away the additional pain created through muscle tension. Many people report significant relief from techniques that release tension. However, consult with a health care provider to determine the best pain management plan for your unique needs.

What causes muscle tension? It is important to note that chronic pain is physical, it occurs in your body. However, muscle tension, which is also physical and occurring in your body, is influenced by many factors. Environmental and emotional stress are major contributors to increased muscle tension.

Our bodies are evolutionarily developed to protect us by running away from danger, or if we can’t escape, to try to hide by freezing, or to fight the danger. This is the **fight/flight/freeze** instinct. When triggered by an environmental threat, this instinct kicks in immediately and unconsciously to save us. A powerful host of internal events are coordinated, including increased muscle tension, as we tense up and brace our bodies to prepare for action. The way the system is designed is that when we run or fight, the tension is released. When the threat is over, our system returns to normal and we go on our way. However, in modern life, we are often exposed to threats that we can’t escape from, such as traffic jams or overloads of paperwork we can’t finish on time. When this happens the tension is not able to release and the system doesn’t return to normal. Instead, a ‘new normal’ of constant muscle tension and a stress response is created. This is a major contributor to chronic pain. Add to this scenario the fact that it is not just external threats that trigger the fight/flight response. If we waited until we saw or experienced a threat like a mountain lion, it would be too late. So, our alarm system developed to respond to the *thought* of a potential danger, such as a rustle in the bushes that could be a lion. In today’s terms, this means that thoughts or emotions like worry can also set off the alarm and increase muscle tension. **The good news is that you can learn simple techniques to reduce muscle tension and shut off the alarm system when it is not needed.** These mechanisms reverse the stress response and are often called the relaxation response, a term first coined by Herbert Benson, MD in his book, ‘The Relaxation Response’.

Source: Wendy Barron, PhD, Senior Psychologist, Health + Hospitals/Gouverneur



What about medication for pain? Pain medication is generally ineffective at addressing chronic pain. Patients often build tolerance and then need increasingly higher dosages. Moreover, it is easy to get addicted to pain medications, especially opioids. Aside from addiction, these medications can leave people too drowsy or 'out of it' to function in their daily lives, or to engage in healthy pain-relieving activities such as exercise. In most cases, pain medication should be a short-term intervention or last resort. Because depression and anxiety are closely interrelated with chronic pain, some anti-depressants or anxiety medications can be effective with pain. However, I would opt for trying the techniques and treatments discussed above prior to trying medication. Please consult with a medical professional about your specific needs before trying any pain medications.

Is there a link between trauma and pain? Because trauma, including emotional trauma, leads to a heightened chronic stress response, it also often leads to the development of chronic muscle tension and pain. If you have undergone trauma or are experiencing emotional distress which might impact your pain, consider seeking therapy from a qualified mental health professional with experience in working with trauma and chronic pain.

Is there a link between sleep and pain? Chronic pain and sleep are deeply connected. If you suffer from chronic pain you have probably been woken up by pain and/or found it difficult to fall asleep due to the pain. However, poor sleep can also contribute to pain. Researchers have found that hormonal changes that accompany poor sleep quality actually make us more sensitive to pain. These are some of the same stress hormones involved in the fight/flight response. If you are experiencing sleep problems and have chronic pain, it is essential that you get adequate treatment for both problems. Talk to your health care provider about potential underlying sleep conditions, such as sleep apnea. Practicing some of the relaxation techniques presented in the webinar can help when you are struggling to sleep. You can also meet with a sleep specialist or a mental health professional with expertise in sleep and sleep hygiene. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy has been found effective in treating sleep disorders. To learn more, visit www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/features/pain-sleep.

Can mindfulness help with pain? Mindfulness means being aware of what is going on in our minds and bodies. This may seem obvious, but often we are too busy to notice what we are thinking and feeling, or we learn to push away uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness teaches us to notice when our stress response is triggered and to remember to use techniques to evoke the relaxation response. Jon Kabat Zinn, Ph.D, developed a widely used therapy called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). He was one of the pioneers of using meditation to treat chronic pain. You can view his demonstrations and lectures on YouTube to learn more.

Can mindfulness help with pain? There is evidence to suggest that diet impacts physical pain. This may be because inflammation increases pain, so food which increases inflammation in our system contributes to pain. Therefore, eating an anti-inflammatory diet, such as the Mediterranean diet, can reduce pain. There are many resources online for anti-inflammatory diets, for example, the one described by Andrew Weil, MD. Consider consulting with a registered dietitian (RD) who has expertise in chronic pain.

Are there alternative therapies that help with pain? Physical therapy, acupuncture, chiropractic, and massage can be helpful in reducing pain. Psychotherapy can be very helpful in coping with the physical and emotional aspects of chronic pain. Ideally, find a therapist that integrates both mind and body in their approach. There is significant evidence that these treatments can help in reducing pain. Contact your insurance provider for a list of providers that they cover.

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