

Chronic pain

Chronic pain is very common. It affects millions of people in the UK. It can have a huge impact on your quality of life and can also affect the lives of your family and those around you.

What is chronic pain?

Chronic pain is usually defined as:

- Pain that continues for more than 3 months after the usual recovery period for an illness or injury.
- Pain that goes on over months or years as a result of a chronic condition.

Chronic pain may be felt in a specific part of the body, e.g. back, shoulders, or more generalised throughout the body.

Why does the pain not stop?

It is not clear why some people get chronic pain, even after minor injuries, while others recover as we would expect.

What we do know is that although the tissues that were originally damaged have healed, the signals that tell your brain about the pain have changed. The pain is real but no longer helpful. The pain pathways have been put on **high alert** and therefore respond to normal signals of stretch and pressure.

Things that may increase pain messages

- Rest = causes weak muscles / joint stiffness and a decrease fitness.
- Doing too much = more pain.
- Difficulty sleeping = focus on pain more.
- Thoughts and feelings start to affect pain leading to stress, anxiety and depression.
- Prolonged stress impairs your brains ability to regulate your body and cope with pain.

- The more stress you experience the more sensitive your brain becomes to pain.
- May start to affect family / relationships / work.

Things that may reduce pain messages

- Learning about chronic pain = the more informed we are the more we are able to cope as fear is reduced and confidence increased.
- Reassurance that pain is real but **you** can influence it.
- Regular daily exercise = to move and strengthen muscles.
- Stretching = to reduce tightness in muscles and improve movement in the joints.
- Relaxation techniques.
- Socialising / having fun / continuing work / hobbies.

Management of chronic pain

- Your doctor or physiotherapist can provide education and advice to enable you to understand how to manage your pain.
- Passive treatments, i.e. massage are not helpful as they may reinforce pain and beliefs that something is damaged and needs to be made better.
- It is important to get on with life despite the pain. Remember that **hurt does not mean harm**.
- You may have good and bad days.
- It is important not to do too much on a good day and too little on a bad day. This is known as boom and bust and may lead to less and less activity.
- Instead learn to pace activities. Pacing is a technique that you can use to gradually increase your activity level.
- Set yourself **SMART** goals (see over).

Simple – Measurable – Achievable – Realistic – Time limited

For example, your goal may be to walk to the shop. Start with a short walk and gradually increase the distance as you feel able. Set yourself a time limit, for example, 2 weeks and aim to have achieved the goal by that time.

This will lead to increased self-confidence, increased fitness and being more active which means **you** are ultimately **in control**.

Try using this goal sheet to keep a record of your progress. If you are finding it hard to think of a goal ask yourself:

- “What do I really want to get back to?”
- “What did I use to enjoy?”
- “What would make my life a bit better now?”

GOAL	Target	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
e.g. Walking to shop	Walk 200 yards every day					

Choose a time of day that is convenient to you and try and complete the target at the same time every day. As soon as you have completed a target tick it off.

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