

Dealing with Chronic Pain

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There are currently 86 million Americans suffering from chronic pain. Chronic pain is one of the more challenging disorders treated by clinicians and one of the most frustrating and disabling ailments for patients. People suffering from chronic pain often develop poor habits in response to their pain. They often avoid activities, places, or events that they feel are likely to increase their pain level. As a result, individuals with chronic pain tend to develop physical disabilities, which often lead to job loss and family hardships. Chronic pain affects not only physical health but the mental, emotional and social aspects of life as well.

It is important to seek proper treatment in the early diagnosis of chronic pain. The longer a person experiences pain, the harder it is to treat. Early intervention often results in good outcomes. Delay of treatment, on the other hand, puts a person at risk for additional problems such as sleeping difficulty, depression, muscle weakness, muscle loss, and physical or mental disability.

To seek proper treatment, you must first determine whether or not you have chronic pain. How do you know if you have chronic pain? If you have been diagnosed with Fibromyalgia, chronic headaches, myofascial pain, RSD/CRPS, diabetic neuropathy, chronic fatigue syndrome, chronic pelvic/back pain, or TMJ dysfunction, then you are suffering from chronic pain. In addition, any pain experienced longer than three months puts you at risk for developing chronic pain so consult your physician as soon as possible.

By definition, chronic pain syndrome is “long standing (usually greater than 6 months) nonspecific or multiple pain complaints that is often without an identifiable cause.” There is no single treatment that can relieve chronic pain. The best way to deal with chronic pain is through an integrative approach ...addressing diet, lifestyle, work/family stress, medication, nutritional supplements, mental/emotional health and physical condition.

Physical therapy and rehabilitation plays an important role in the treatment of chronic pain. Physical therapy uses modalities such as ultrasound, hot pack, electrical stimulation, anodyne, and biofeedback to reduce pain. Furthermore, physical therapy techniques such as aquatic therapy, mobilizations, myofascial release, massage and craniosacral therapy are used to increase short-term pain relief and relaxation. Gentle progressive strengthening to prepare the body for higher-level activities and to transition into long-term pain relief must immediately follow. An individualized home exercise program is usually developed by a physical therapist to help a patient with chronic pain improve his or her functional mobility to a maximum level and to prevent the worsening of symptoms. Education on proper lifting, sitting, and standing to reduce strain on the body, is crucial.

Patience is a key to treating chronic pain. Just as with injured athletes returning to their sport, it takes time for people with chronic pain to return to their prior functional mobility. It is important to understand that treating chronic pain is not simply eliminating pain but rather, rehabilitating your body so that your pain threshold is changed. This way, your body will not perceive a normal daily activity as one that is painful.

Pain threshold is the level at which an activity or movement is perceived by the body as painful at that particular intensity and above. The body tolerates all activities at intensities lower than the pain threshold. Occasionally, our pain threshold is temporarily lowered by an injury, illness or inactivity. It is essential for the body to return to previous activities as soon as tolerated so that the pain threshold is not lowered permanently.

Athletes tend to have higher pain thresholds because of the training they go through. People living sedentary lifestyles tend to have very low pain thresholds. Those suffering from chronic pain have pain thresholds below normal. The goal of physical therapy is to raise the pain threshold to a level closer to normal through training and muscle reeducation.

During the rehabilitation process, it is essential to shift focus away from pain and towards function. Adjusting your lifestyle to reduce the amount of stress is a key to successfully battling chronic pain. Engage yourself and your family in a regular exercise program and diaphragmatic breathing or simply listening to music.

Relief from acupuncture, acupressure, massage and chiropractic treatments may be gained for some individuals with chronic pain. Others do not respond well to these treatments. Speak with your healthcare professional in determining which treatment works best for you. Although therapies tried in the past may not have helped, there are new procedures that may benefit you today. It is equally important to seek the aid of professionals who specialize in treating chronic pain – physical therapists, psychologists, anesthesiologists, neurologists, gynecologists/obstetricians, rheumatologists, specialists and primary care physicians. Clinicians working together in an integrative approach can help manage your pain effectively.

Dealing with chronic pain can be a very lengthy and frustrating experience. However, the desire for an improved quality of life is certainly worth the journey.

To learn more about the treatment of chronic pain, contact Professional Therapy Services at **(309) 674-7874** or visit us on the web at **www.ptsinc.org**.