

Chronic Pain Fact Sheet

What is chronic pain?

- Chronic pain is pain that lasts long enough (after normal healing or for at least three months), or is intense enough, to affect a person's normal activities and well-being.¹
- Chronic pain may be nociceptive (pain that is caused by a noxious stimulus, such as injury, disease or inflammation), neuropathic (pain that reflects nervous system injury or impairment), or both and caused by injury (e.g., trauma, surgery), malignant conditions, or a variety of chronic non-life-threatening conditions (e.g., arthritis, fibromyalgia, neuropathy).²
- The most common types of non-cancer chronic pain are back pain, headache and joint pain, including arthritis.¹

What causes chronic pain?

- Failure to treat acute pain promptly and appropriately at the time of injury, during initial medical and surgical care, and at the time of transition to community-based care, may contribute to the development of chronic pain syndromes.¹

Is chronic pain a serious problem?

- Although the exact prevalence is unknown, information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Pain Foundation suggests that more than 42 million Americans age 20 and over suffer from chronic pain.^{3,4}
- Chronic pain is the most common cause of long-term disability, and almost one-third of all Americans will experience severe chronic pain at some point in their lives. Despite the number of people who experience pain, it is often undertreated.⁵

How is chronic pain different from acute pain?

- Acute pain occurs suddenly due to illness, injury or surgery. Unlike chronic pain, acute pain has a short duration, which subsides when the injured tissue heals.¹
- Chronic pain is pain that lasts long enough (after normal healing or for at least three months), or is intense enough, to affect a person's normal activities and well-being.¹

How is chronic pain treated or managed?

- Chronic pain can be treated or managed in a variety of ways as determined by a pain management specialist. The American Chronic Pain Association (ACPA) reports that medications and treatments, along with pain management techniques like relaxation and exercise, can be used to reduce pain and improve patient quality of life.²

Why is it important to treat and manage chronic pain?

- A 2005 survey conducted by the Stanford University Medical Center found that only 31 percent of patients with pain reported complete relief and 21 percent reported little or no relief after speaking with their physician about their pain.⁶
- Inadequate pain control represents the biggest concern of pain sufferers. When compared with the general public, fewer pain sufferers consider themselves to be in fair to excellent health. A 2008 study revealed that people suffering with chronic pain felt less confident in their ability to care for themselves compared to the general public.⁷
- When unrelieved or undertreated, pain can negatively impact a person's quality of life, causing functional impairment and disability, psychological distress (such as anxiety and depression), and sleep deprivation. Chronic pain sufferers may experience a diminished ability to participate in or enjoy activities, experience more frequent disruptions in sleep, and feel a strain on their relationships with family and friends.⁷

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