

Chest
Heart &
Stroke
Scotland



CHRONIC PAIN



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

This Essential Guide is about chronic pain.

It explains:

- what chronic pain is
- some of the causes and types of chronic pain
- ways to cope with chronic pain

What is chronic pain?

Chronic pain is any pain that lasts **more than three months**.

Chronic pain is a common symptom of a lot of long-term health conditions, including stroke, respiratory problems, diabetes, and Long Covid.

Chronic pain is a very individual thing. It can vary a lot from person to person, and even from day to day.

Some chronic pain responds to treatment, but even if you can't entirely avoid the pain, there are techniques that help to manage it.



What causes chronic pain?

Sometimes, chronic pain can occur without an obvious cause, but it usually happens following an illness or injury, such as COVID or stroke. Chronic pain can also be caused by a problem such as asthma or angina which puts your body under continued stress.

The most common cause of chronic pain is from tissue damage (**nociceptive pain**).

Another common cause is nerve damage (**neuropathic pain**).



Some people have pain even though there is no obvious damage to the body at all. This is called **nociplastic pain**.

Chronic pain can also be associated with **migraine**, a common neurological disorder.

Common kinds of pain

Muscular pain

Often caused by injuries or stress. Painful muscles may be in just one part of the body, or spread throughout.

Bone pain

Bone pain is often caused by conditions like arthritis, osteoporosis, or repeated injuries.

Chest pain

Common in people with heart or breathing problems, such as angina or asthma. **If you have a new, unexpected chest pain, contact a doctor.**

Neurological pain

Neurological pain is pain centred on the nerves themselves. Examples include diabetic neuropathic pain (DNP) or central post-stroke pain (CPSP)

Central Post-Stroke Pain (CPSP)

Following a stroke, up to 20% of people may experience a condition called central post-stroke pain. This occurs when the pain centres in your brain are damaged by the stroke, making you process pain differently.

Central post-stroke pain, and central neuropathic pain in general, can feel a lot of different ways.

CPSP generally does not respond to over-the-counter painkillers like paracetamol or ibuprofen, but other treatments can help to relieve pain. You may be offered medications which are not primarily designed as painkillers, such as anti-depressants or anti-epileptic drugs, which can help to treat the underlying problem.



What does chronic pain feel like?

Chronic pain can be felt in a wide range of ways. Some common descriptions are:

Tingling, itching, or tickling

Sharp, stabbing pains

Numbness and aching

Burning or warmth

Pins and needles

Twitching or small spasms

Sensitivity to touch or light

The signs, symptoms, and pattern of pain can vary in frequency and severity from one person to another.

Managing chronic pain

There are a few ways in which chronic pain may be treated. Everyone responds differently to pain treatment. It may take a few tries before you find something that works for you.

Make sure that you tell your health team about any other treatments or medications you are taking.

Some therapies that may be considered for your pain include:

- **Medications**
- **Psychological therapies**
- **Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS)**
- **Lifestyle changes**
- **Complementary therapies**

Medications

A range of painkillers, both prescription and over-the-counter, are used to help chronic pain. Their effectiveness will depend on the cause and severity of your pain.

Painkillers may be taken as pills or liquids, or they may be applied to the skin. Make sure you know how to use your medication. Always discuss the side-effects and dosage instructions with your doctor.

It is important to **tell your doctor** if you are taking painkillers. Always **follow the instructions**. Never take more than the maximum dose.

Neuropathic pain can sometimes be reduced using **prescription medications** such as antidepressants or anti-epileptic medications.

You may also be prescribed medications to address the underlying causes of your pain, such as angina medications.

Psychological therapies

Psychological and talking therapies are helpful for many people with chronic pain.

This does not mean your pain is “all in your head” or a mental health problem. Rather, treating your emotional and mental health helps with chronic pain because stress and low mood affect your whole body, and can trigger or worsen symptoms like pain.

Social, psychological, and emotional support also help with chronic pain because being happy and healthy improves your ability to cope.



Transcutaneous Electronic Nerve Stimulation (TENS)

Chronic pain can sometimes be reduced by transcutaneous electronic nerve stimulation.

In this process, a TENS unit - a small black box - delivers a low-level electrical charge through electrodes which are attached (via a pad) to the skin. This can “reprogramme” your nervous system for a short time, reducing your pain.

However, as with other treatments, the effectiveness can vary between people.

TENS is largely safe, and easily done at home. However, you should **always discuss with your doctor** before attempting TENS.

If you have a pacemaker implanted, TENS is not advised, as the electrical current delivered by the unit can interfere with the function of your pacemaker.

Lifestyle changes

Diet

If you notice that you often feel worse after eating certain foods, try cutting them out of your diet to see if that helps. It can help to discuss your diet with a GP or dietician.

Exercise

Pain can be improved in some cases by careful exercise, which strengthens muscles and improves blood flow. However, be careful when exercising. See a health professional before increasing your exercise. If exercise causes you pain or discomfort, you should stop.

Smoking and alcohol

Tobacco and alcohol can reduce blood flow to parts of your body, which can make pain worse. Consider whether you can reduce your alcohol intake. If you smoke, you can find help to quit at www.nhsinform.scot/campaigns/quit-your-way-scotland

Sleep

Chronic pain is often worse when you are tired. Pain can also affect your sleep, causing a vicious cycle where you become more and more tired, making the pain worse.

Improving your sleep habits can help. Build a sleep routine, going to bed at a regular time every night. Make sure your bedroom is comfortable, dark, and well-ventilated. Avoid screens for at least half an hour before bed.

Mindfulness and meditation

Mindfulness (awareness of your body) and meditation (awareness of your feelings and thoughts) reduce pain in around 1 in 4 people.

Mindfulness and meditation exercises can have short- and long-term benefits for chronic pain. They lower stress, improve breathing, and help you develop coping skills. You can find exercises online, through apps on your phone, or through books and classes. Ask your pharmacist or GP for local support.

Complementary therapies

A wide range of complementary therapies are available for pain, although they do not all have a strong evidence base. What works varies a lot between people, so you may want to try different things. Some things which people with chronic pain have found helpful include:



Massage, especially myofascial release massage - **this is not appropriate for everyone, so check first!**



Acupuncture or acupressure



Aromatherapy



Oxygen therapy. This may be combined with hyperbaric therapy, where you are put into a pressurised chamber.



Osteopathic or chiropractic manipulation.

Herbal remedies and supplements

IMPORTANT: natural remedies can interact badly with medications you are taking. Consult your doctor first!

It is important to remember that all of the above are still **medical procedures**. Always make sure that you use a trusted, qualified practitioner for these therapies.

You should always feel able to ask the person offering these therapies whether they are registered with a professional body, where they got their training, and how much experience they have.



Managing pain

When your pain is bad, there are a few things you can do to help yourself cope. These are all techniques that work for some people better than others - try different things, and do what you find helps you!



Breathing exercises - Breathe slowly in through your nose and out through your mouth. Making sounds - crying out, humming, etc. - can also help.



Physical relaxation - You might find that being physically relaxed helps you to cope with pain.



Warmth - A warming pack or gel on a painful area can help. Make sure that you don't put hot things directly onto the skin - wrap hot water bottles in a towel or cover first.



Tea and a blanket - Try to find a comfortable space to relax. Hot drinks, like tea or hot chocolate, may be soothing and help you to be calm.



Distracting yourself - Try to take your mind off the pain. This might be music, a book, or an engaging task or hobby. Colouring in or tracing a labyrinth is helpful to many people.



A hot bath - Warm or hot baths often ease muscle aches and pain. Swimming can have the same effect - being in water supports your body and helps your muscles relax.



Clothing choices - Wearing loose, comfortable clothes can reduce joint and skin pain. Gloves can also help with hand pain.



Human contact - Being touched by another person can release endorphines, a natural painkiller.

Additional resources

The Pain Toolkit

A support toolkit designed by and for people with chronic pain. A paper copy of this toolkit can be ordered online or through your doctor.

www.paintoolkit.org

Pain Concern UK

A charity which offers resources and helpline support to people with chronic pain UK-wide.

www.painconcern.org.uk

Helpline: 0300 123 0789

Email: help@painconcern.org.uk

NHS Inform

Central NHS information on chronic pain. There is also a self-help guide, with step by step advice to managing your pain.

www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/brain-nerves-and-spinal-cord/chronic-pain

The British Pain Society

A UK-wide organisation bringing together specialists from all disciplines to help in understanding and managing pain.

www.britishpainsociety.org

Pain Association Scotland

A charity which provides training and support with self-management for chronic pain.

www.painassociation.co.uk

Phone: 0800 783 6059

Flippin' Pain

A movement to raise awareness of chronic pain and explain the science behind pain.

www.flippinpain.co.uk

Email: info@flippinpain.co.uk

Retrain Pain

Free, online resources and videos to help you to understand and manage chronic pain. Also provides worksheets and a monthly newsletter.

www.retrainpain.org

Our publications are available for free to anyone in Scotland who needs them. Go to www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub for all our resources, including other Essential Guides in this series.

For free, confidential advice and support from our **Advice Line practitioners**, call: 0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm), text: NURSE to 66777 or email: advice@chss.org.uk.

Across Scotland, over one million people – that's one in five of us – are living with the effects of a chest, heart or stroke condition. We are here to help everyone who needs us. But we need your support to do this. Go to www.chss.org.uk/supportus to find out how you can help more people in Scotland.

If you would like this resource in an alternative format, please contact our Advice Line practitioners.

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NO LIFE HALF LIVED

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