

WHAT IS CHRONIC PAIN

Perspectives from a Western medical approach

In this section, we will go over how chronic pain is understood from a Western medical approach because:

- 1) knowing the common terms used in healthcare may help when speaking with healthcare providers and searching for more information on pain management.
- 2) knowing why pain happens and what makes it worse can help you manage your pain.

We acknowledge that this is only one way in which chronic pain can be understood and other ways can also be helpful in managing pain.





Understanding chronic pain

Chronic pain is ongoing pain that lasts for more than three months.

Chronic pain is common and affects about one in five people. It can show up at any age. You may feel it all the time. Or it may come and go. It may be worse at certain times and better at others.

Chronic pain may start after an injury like a car accident. Or it may be connected to a medical condition like arthritis or nerve pain from diabetes.

Sometimes there is no obvious or known reason for the pain, but that doesn't mean the pain isn't real.

Chronic pain is often a life-long disease, but you CAN learn to manage it to lower your pain and improve your quality of life.

Chronic pain can affect all parts of you

***Trouble doing
daily activities***

*"It's so hard, eh? It's
exhausting when you're
in pain...it's so tiring."*

***Feeling angry,
frustrated, sad***

*"You're constantly looking
down on yourself... You
feel shamed for feeling
this, not being able to do
certain things..."*



*"I kind of keep to myself.
I don't want nobody else
to know that I'm in pain
all the time."*

*"And then sometimes
the pain and everything
gets so bad. ...I just, cry
'cuz there's nothing else
to do."*

***Trouble connecting
to others***

Feeling hopeless

Chronic pain is an invisible condition

Other people like family, friends, co-workers, community, and healthcare providers can't see your pain.

Because pain is invisible, sometimes other people may not believe your pain or may not take your pain seriously.

Not being believed can be very hurtful and make you feel even worse. You may feel:

- hurt and sad
- misunderstood
- isolated and lonely
- frustrated and angry

Your pain is real.
Just because others can't
see it, it doesn't mean that
it should be ignored.



Chronic pain is unique to each person

Chronic pain can feel different from one person to another. How pain shows up for you can depend on the things that happened in the past and the things going on in your life right now.

Your experience of chronic pain is unique to you, but you are not alone!

How chronic pain feels

Chronic pain may show up as different types of feelings in the body. The pain may be constant, always there in the background. Or it can show up suddenly and go away.

How intense or strong pain feels can change. It may be different across the cycle of the day or week. It may change depending on the season or weather.

TIP: Keeping a journal or writing down when your pain shows up or gets worse can be helpful for pain management and visits with healthcare providers.

Chronic pain may feel sharp like a quick pinch or dull like a lasting ache. For some people it may feel like throbbing or burning. Other people may feel tingling or shooting pain. Some people may feel pain that's like an electric shock.

Here are some more words to describe chronic pain:

- aching
- biting
- burning
- cold
- dull
- excruciating
- nagging
- nauseating
- numb
- piercing
- radiating
- sharp
- shooting
- sore
- spreading
- stabbing
- stinging
- tender
- throbbing
- tingling

What words best describe your pain?



Where and when do you feel the most pain?

How pain works in the body

Pain is a normal part of life. It is a feeling you have in response to an actual or potential threat to the body.

Pain protects your body from danger or harm. It is your body's warning signal.

Pain is not always a sign of injury

Having pain doesn't always mean that there is injury or damage to the body.

Some things can hurt, but don't do any harm. Think of the feeling of "brain freeze" when you eat ice cream. It hurts but doesn't do any harm.



And sometimes a person can have a serious injury, but not feel any pain.

Some people have been hurt playing a sport or during their job but they don't remember feeling any pain until later.

These examples show that **"hurt doesn't always equal harm"**. Why does this happen?

How much pain you feel is decided by your brain.

In an intense situation like playing a competitive sport or focusing on a job, your brain may not produce pain when you're hurt to help you focus on your goal.

At other times, when you're not distracted and really focus on the pain, even a paper cut or a hang nail can really hurt.

Let's take a closer look at how pain works in the body.

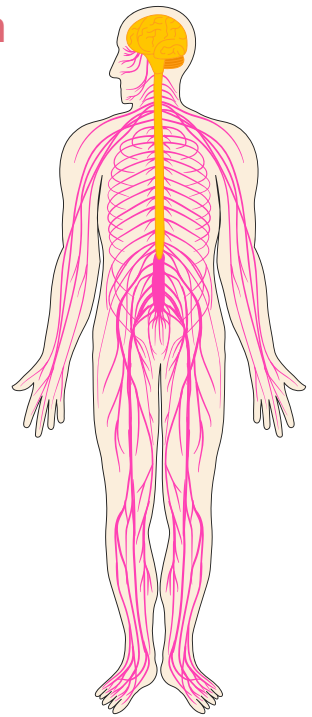
Pain and the nervous system

The nervous system is made up of the brain and the spinal cord (shown in **yellow**), and peripheral nerves (shown in **pink**). All these parts are involved in processing pain.

Think of the nervous system like an alarm system. The **peripheral nerves** detect sensations in the body. They send messages about these sensations through the **spinal cord** to the **brain**.

These messages can be about:

- temperature changes, like hot and cold
- mechanical changes, like a pinch, pressure, or cut
- chemical changes, like lactic acid in sore muscles, allergens, or inflammation in the body



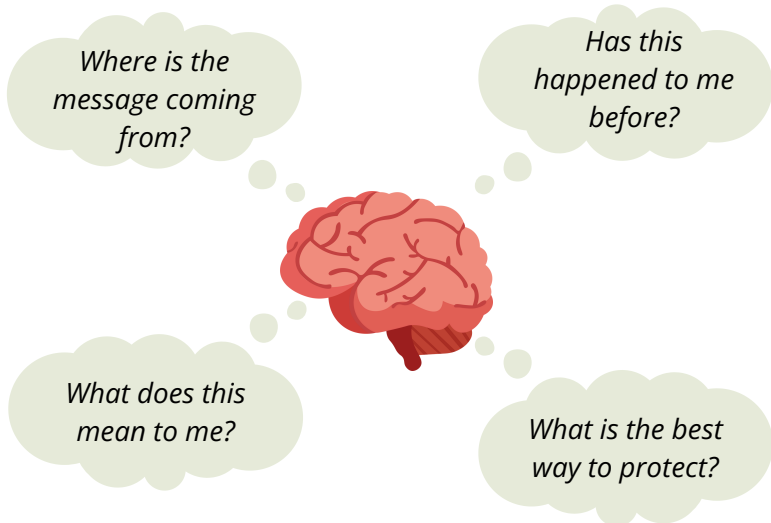
When a message gets to the brain, it goes to many different areas in the brain. All these areas work together to process the message. The brain then decides what needs to be done next to protect the body.

If the brain decides that there is danger to the body, the alarm system usually goes off and you feel pain.



The experience of pain

The experience you feel as pain comes from the brain. The brain takes stock of the whole situation before setting off the pain alarm. It takes into account what is going on in your body and in the outside world. It also considers your past experiences.



When the brain decides that protecting a part of the body is needed, then you feel pain!

Useful pain terms you may come across

Acute pain

Nociceptive (no-see-cep-tive) pain is pain that is related to an injury or damage to a part of the body. This is the most common type of pain.

Neuropathic (new-ro-path-ick) pain is pain that is related to damage to the nerves in the body. This type of pain often shows up in diabetes.

Nociplastic (no-see-plas-tick) pain is pain that comes from changes to the way that the body's pain system works. This type of pain shows up in conditions like fibromyalgia.



Things to Remember:

- Chronic pain lasts 3 months or more.
- Hurt does not always equal harm.
- All pain is produced by the brain.
- The brain considers the whole situation before setting off the pain alarm.

Health conditions and chronic pain

There are some common health conditions that make chronic pain more likely to show up.

Arthritis

Arthritis is a disease that causes inflammation and swelling of one or more joints in the body. It is also a common cause of chronic pain.

Arthritis pain often comes with sore and stiff joints. The pain can be in different parts of the body, like feet, ankles, knees, hips, wrists, or fingers. It often shows up on both sides of the body.

The pain may be there all the time, or it may come and go. It may be most noticeable when you first wake up or when you haven't moved for a while. You may also have numbness of the joints. It may be difficult to move your joints when you have pain from arthritis.

For more information visit the Arthritis Society Canada website (arthritis.ca).



Diabetes

Diabetes is a chronic disease that occurs when sugar levels in the blood are too high.

Having high blood sugar for a long time can damage nerves in the body. Damage affects how nerves send pain signals. This nerve damage is called **diabetic neuropathy**.

Diabetic neuropathy can show up as feelings of numbness and tingling pain in the hands, legs, and feet. Some people describe it as electric shock or burning pain.

Diabetes also causes inflammation in the body that can cause pain in the joints and muscles.

If you have diabetes, keeping your blood sugar levels in check can help prevent damage to nerves or keep damage from getting worse. You can do this by getting more physical activity in your day, eating nutritious foods, and taking certain medications.



Injury

Chronic pain can also show up after an injury like a fall or an accident.

Some injuries are more serious than others, but they all come with having some pain. The pain usually goes away once the injury to the body has healed.

Sometimes pain after an injury can last for longer than the time it takes to heal. If pain lasts for more than 3 months after an injury, then it may have become chronic pain.

To prevent chronic pain after the an injury, it's important to keep your level of pain under control. It also helps to address any worries or stress that you may have.

— When getting treatment for your injury, talk to your healthcare provider about how much pain you have.

Ask a healthcare provider about mental health supports available in your community. These can help you cope with any post-traumatic stress or worries about pain or the injury.



Surgery

Many people have surgery for different health reasons. There is usually some pain after surgery that normally goes away once the body has healed.

Sometimes pain after surgery can last for longer than the healing process. If pain lasts for more than 3 months after surgery, it may have become chronic pain.

If you're having surgery, it's important to tell your surgery healthcare team if you:

- already have chronic pain
- are really worried about pain or surgery
- are already taking opioid medications
- do not have a lot of support
- are in a lot of pain after the surgery

This information will help your surgery team better manage your pain after surgery.



Why pain persists

The nervous system changes and adapts

The nervous system can change as you go through life. This ability to change is called **neuroplasticity**.

Neuroplasticity helps the nervous system to adapt to the different experiences in your life.

The good and bad things that happen to you in childhood and in later life can affect how the nervous system works.

The nervous system gets more sensitive

Sometimes the nervous system may get more sensitive to try to protect you from future dangers.

It may become like a fire alarm going off even after the fire is out.

When this fire alarm goes off, you may continue to feel pain even after an injury has healed.



When the brain and spinal cord become more sensitive, here are some things that can happen:

Hyperalgesia:

things that already hurt start to hurt more

Allodynia:

things that didn't hurt before start to hurt now

Connections in the brain get stronger

Another example of neuroplasticity is when connections in the brain become stronger.

Imagine pathways through snow. When everyone takes the same path, it gets easier and faster to get through the snow.

Connections in the brain that send pain signals can become like these pathways in the snow.

The brain pathways get stronger over time and pain messages can get across faster.

The pain alarm gets activated more easily and pain shows up more often.



The pathways in the brain are shaped by the good and bad experiences in your life. Pain pathways can get stronger because of things like injury, stress, or trauma.

Your experiences can affect pain

Things that happen in your life can affect your experience of pain. Even your thoughts and feelings can make pain better or worse.

Your thoughts and feelings


What you think and feel affects your body chemistry and can affect your pain.

Your thoughts and emotions help the brain decide if the body needs protection in the form of pain. What you think and feel can also affect how quick your nervous system is to raise the pain alarm.

For example, worrying that something is really wrong with you may make pain worse. Calming thoughts can make pain better.

Chronic pain often brings up difficult feelings like anger, frustration, worry, or sadness. These feelings can also make pain worse. Calming practices can help you cope with difficult feelings *and* help to manage pain.

See Page 31 in the “Managing Chronic Pain” section for helpful calming practices you can do on your own.



Mental health and pain go hand in hand

Mental health and chronic pain can affect each other. People who have chronic pain are more likely to:

- have anxiety or depression
- have stress and trauma
- struggle with using drugs and alcohol



Anxiety and depression

Anxiety shows up as intense worry, tension, and dread about things that might happen in the future. It may feel like you're always on alert.

Anxiety can also show up as intense worry about how bad your pain will get and how you'll cope with it.

It's normal to have anxiety once in a while or when under pressure. But, constant anxiety can get in the way of daily activities and make pain worse.

Depression shows up as a feeling of sadness and emptiness that doesn't go away. It may also come with irritability and frustration.

Depression may come along with anxiety or feeling restless. It may bring a loss of interest in things. It can come with feeling hopeless and like life is not worth living.

Depression can make it harder to do daily activities. It can get in the way of work, hobbies, and relationships. It can also affect sleep and reduce energy levels.

Stress and trauma

Stress is when you feel worried, tense, or upset from a difficult situation. Stress can worsen your pain.

Pain can also affect how you respond to stressful situations. Learning to manage stress is an important part of managing chronic pain.

Trauma is a response to a shocking, scary, or dangerous experience like an act of violence or a frightening accident.

Even witnessing something scary happen to someone else can lead to trauma.

You may also carry the heavy burden of trauma from the harmful things that happened to your parents, your grandparents, and other ancestors through colonization.

Trauma is also connected to colonization. Colonization often involved violent, oppressive practices that deeply harmed many in the community.

For example, survivors of residential or day schools might have trauma that affects their families. Trauma passed down from one generation to the next is called **intergenerational trauma**.

Trauma can have a long-lasting negative effect on your emotions and health.

Living with trauma can also affect your experience of pain. Healing from trauma is a powerful way to help manage chronic pain.

Substance use and addiction

Some people who have chronic pain may turn to alcohol or illegal drugs to help them cope. These may provide short-term relief. But using them can cause **substance use disorder** (also called addiction).

Some people may develop a substance use disorder from certain pain medications, like opioids. Overusing opioids can increase pain sensitivity and worsen things long-term.

See Page 65 in the “Medical Care for Chronic Pain section” for useful tips on safely taking pain medication.



Taking care of your mental health is an important part of pain management. There are things you can do on your own to support your mental health. Connecting with others is also important.

For ways to support your mental health, see pages 27-32 in the “Managing Chronic Pain” section.

Your experience and pain: The good news

The ability of the nervous system to change and adapt means that pain can get better!

There are things you can do to make the nervous system change and become less sensitive. See the next chapter for helpful strategies to manage pain.



Things to Remember:

- Pain persists because of changes in the nervous system.
- Your experiences can affect chronic pain.
- Mental health and pain are connected.
- Since the nervous system can change, chronic pain can be changed too!

